

03

竹町

illustration

トマリ

ス教 の アイ 室

《忘我》のアネット

tion of mission impossible



ファンタジア文庫

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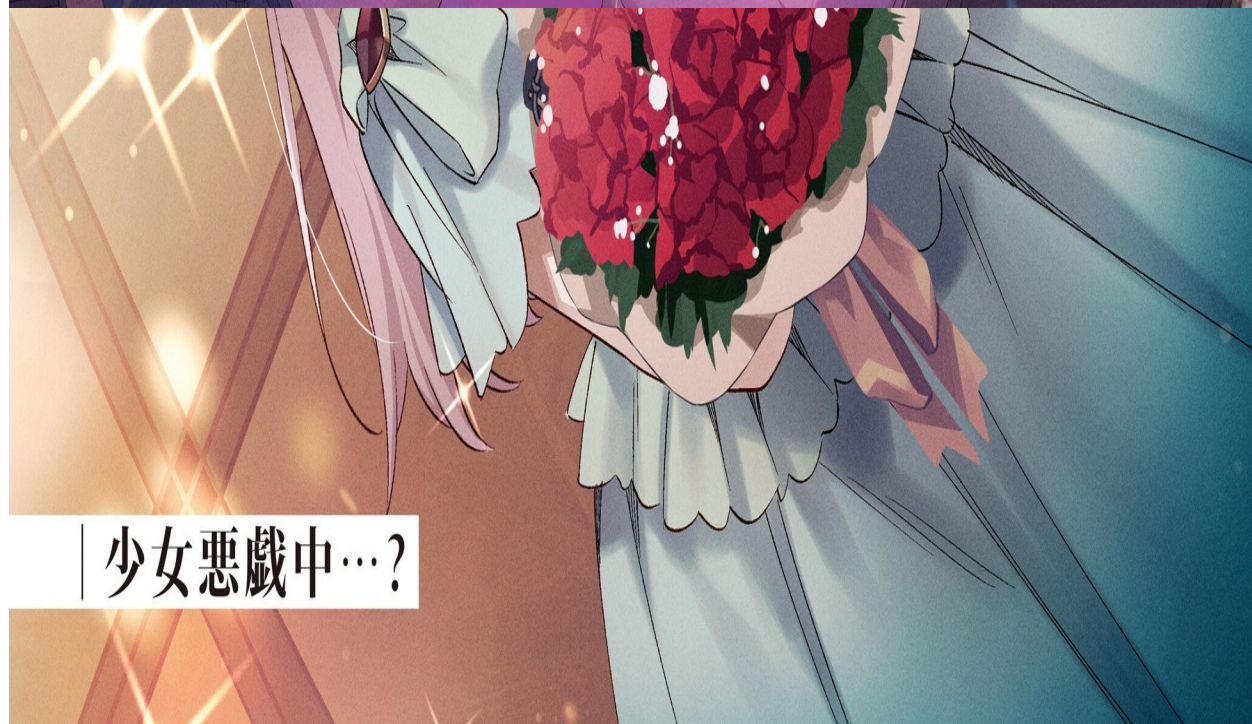
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《忘我》のアネット

スパイ教室

03





SPY ROOM
the room is a specialized institution of mission impossible
code name bouga

145	092	086	078	074	008	004
間章	3章	間章	2章	間章	1章	プロローグ
行方③	母娘	行方②	再会	行方①	魅了	失踪
324	317	289	239	231	225	156
あとがき	NEXT MISSION	エピソード	5章	間章	間章	4章
		忘我	邪悪と闘争	良からぬ者	行方④	決裂

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Prologue: Disappearance

Their comrades had vanished—

Ron calmly accepted this reality, and sat down on the sofa inside the banquet hall of the Kagerou Palace. During normal circumstances, he was a man with barely any expressions, but now his face felt stiff, as his crossed legs showed no movement. He had his eyes closed, as if he was asleep. At intervals, he would open those eyes, looked over at the radio standing on the table, and closed his eyes again. This process repeated over and over. The musical performance of a violin was played on the radio. The radio broadcasts had been introduced during the World War in order to report the situation at the frontlines to the citizens, but now a number of purely entertainment-based broadcasts started to appear, to bring the hearts together of the people that had suffered loss caused by the war. Naturally, this was something to celebrate, and yet at this very moment, it was more than vexing. Finally, the music broadcast came to an end, as the current news started playing. But, even after hearing through the entirety of the reports, no useful information had been gathered.

“At the very least, they weren’t involved in any big accident.” Ron judged with a breath.

Besides him, four other girls were present in the banquet hall. These girls sat around the big table in the middle, gazing at the radio with worry shining in their eyes.

—The spy team [Tomoshibi].

They were a newly-found organization under the Republic of Deen’s Intelligence Agency—The Office of Foreign Intelligence. Ron and these eight girls that made up the team are to challenge missions with a 99% mortality rate—an Impassable Mission. Merely two weeks ago, they managed to safely arrest a spy from the hostile neighbouring Empire, called [Shikabane], and brought their assassination spree to an end.

However, after the particulars had been taken care of, four girls had vanished. The plan had been for them to arrive the previous night, but even as morning came around, none of them arrived. Neither did any contact arrive from their end. They had vanished, you could say.

“It’d be great if they just missed their train...”

The girl who put a bit of hope into her words had silver hair—her name was Lily. She especially stood out because of her lovable exterior features, and her well-endowed bust. However, Ron just shook his head in response.

"I would be satisfied with that explanation if this was you who had vanished."

"How cruel..."

"But, they are our members. I cannot fathom that such a mistake could have happened. They must be in a situation where even informing us is impossible."

Because of their previous mission, Ron had split up the team in two. First, the four girls that were strong enough to assist Ron in his battle against the assassin [Shikabane], and then the other four, who he believed were strong enough to battle the ally of this assassin. The ones that had disappeared were the ones that had been with Ron this entire time. It was hard for him to believe that not one of them would contact him.

"...Some trouble may have occurred, or an incident."

While pouring some tea for Ron, the red-haired girl Grete joined the scene. She had slim limbs, giving her a feeling of being as fragile as glass.

"...Please tell me. How did you and the others spend the past month, Boss?" The other girls nodded along to these words. The commanding white-haired girl, Zibia, glared at Ron, and the brown-haired, feeble girl, Sara, showed a worried expression.

"That's right, I wanted to know about that as well!" Lily pushed her body forwards. **"Why was my room blown up like that?!"**

"....." Ron accepted the tea, and took a sip. "Grete, your tea is as delicious as alw—"

"Don't change the subject!"

"It was a blunder."

"Why would someone's room be blown to smithereens because of a blunder!?"

While being forced to hear out Lily's complaints, Ron searched through his memories. As of right now, the outer wall of Lily's room was entirely broken, fully exposed to the rain. Her bed was partially destroyed, her private belongings scattered in the yard outside, and most of her clothes were burned to a crisp.

Having encountered this horrific scene the night prior, Lily sunk to the ground as her knees gave out. Ron wasn't inhumane, so he started to explain: About what had happened this past month, while Lily and the others were busy with their own mission, and what had led to Lily's room being utterly destroyed—

Chapter 1: Fascination

"Then, Sara's pets will be brought to you later." The black-haired girl, [Yumegatari] Tia said.

She had a beautiful outer appearance, possessing long, beautiful black hair, well-endowed proportions where it mattered, seductive eyes, and lips overflowing with erotic charm. She gave off the vibe of an adult, despite being barely 18 years old.

In order to defeat [Shikabane] on a mission, Grete, Zibia, Sara, and Lily had been chosen, whereas Tia moved over for support.

"I'll schedule it so that your weapons arrive at a later day, under a fictional company. Ah, right, because of Zibia's injury, I'll put in a medkit in case it gets worse."

For the sake of her comrades that had been chosen, she worked in a devoted manner, and she made good progress at helping with their preparations. Inside their team, there was often the question 'Isn't Tia the actual leader?'. Ron had suddenly introduced the system of having a leader, and of all people, Lily had been chosen to do that.

Of course, that brought about the question why they needed a leader in the first place, seeing that they had Ron as the overall Boss, but they eventually were satisfied with the idea that 'Being the leader will surely raise Lily's motivation'. Nobody saw Lily as a leader. Except the person herself of course, who kept praising herself.

Instead, the one to gather the girls around her was Tia. The reason for this wasn't solely because she was skilled at looking after the others. She possessed the beauty to rival everyone in the group, a dignified and calming voice, and a personality to actively involve and interact with the others. On top of that, she was the oldest of the group, alongside Grete. All of these qualities put together led her to become the unofficial leader.

"We're praying for your luck in battle. You better come back alive." Tia worked on her support even a few minutes before the departure, and saw the other four girls off. "Grete, don't force yourself. Please keep close contact with Sensei."

"Yes, thank you for seeing us off..."

Being in the same Intelligence Squad, Grete gave a short thanks. And then, Tia spotted an awkwardly-fidgeting Lily.

"What's wrong, Lily? You're oddly calm."

"Ah, well..." Lily waved her hands, and responded in a quiet voice. "I was just worried. That this selection would make things awkward. But, your voice and actions were the same as always, so..."

"My, that way of thinking isn't like you. You should act more like an idiot." "Phrasing!"

"It's fine. You should be confident in the fact that you had been chosen by Sensei. I'm not frustrated or anything. If anything, I'm happy that your efforts have been acknowledged by Sensei."

She seemed to have been relieved at Tia's words, as Lily's expression lit up like a blooming flower.

"I understand! Having been chosen, the great genius Lily-chan will show an astounding success!" She announced, and dashed out of the entrance. As if to chase after her, the other girls waved their hands at Tia, and headed outside. In the very end, she couldn't keep her smile. She wanted the girls to feel comfortable leaving, not showing any frustration in front of them, but...

"...I wanted to go." She muttered.

She carefully opened the door, checking that Lily and the others had left. She moved back to the banquet hall, stood next to the sofa, and let out a deep sigh. As if all strength had left her body, she collapsed on the sofa.

"I wanted to go as weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeell!!!"

She screamed in a loud voice.

"I can't believe this! I've worked so hard! And yet I was left behind! I was so confident I'd make it! Gaaaah! I'm so frustrated, frustrated, frustrateeeeeed!" She frantically flapped her arms and legs up and down, punching the sofa. "What was I lacking, huh?! I did all my homework, practiced all day!" She continued to complain in a pathetic way. Until the time for their members to depart, she held back, but she had crossed that limit. She was fairly skilled at acting. Biting her tongue, putting all anger into her clenched fists, she managed to bear the shock. But, she couldn't accept these results. Why hadn't she been chosen? Why had Zibia been chosen, while she was still covering from an injury. Or even worse, why was the clumsy Lily chosen? Whatever the reasons may be, there was one fact that she had learned from this.

"Sensei doesn't even recognize my skill!"

And, following that came the conclusion she arrived at.

"So I was just chosen to become a part of [Tomoshihi] solely because of my body!"

That was one very plausible conclusion.

"Now I get it! He gathered us eight girls around him for only one reason! He wanted to be surrounded by beautiful girls, hoping for all sorts of situations to happen! How obscene! Lecherous devil! If only you were to guide me a bit more kindly, I wouldn't mind at all—"

"So noisy."

The person in question, Ron, suddenly appeared, and leaned against the sofa at a moment's notice. Tia fell down on the floor, and gazed up at him with round eyes.

"Eh, Sensei...Since when have you been listening?"

"You've been screaming, so I heard you through the entire house." Ron had a complicated expression on his face.

As Tia was plagued with immense shame and embarrassment, Ron calmly informed her.

"Calm down. I need to talk with you about an important role of yours."

The world is riddled with pain...

Ten years had passed since the greatest war in human history, known as the World War. The politicians of the time had come to the conclusion that fighting shouldn't be done with military force, but with the use of spies, tasked to infiltrate other countries to steal information. Various countries invested resources in the founding of Intelligence Agencies, and the War Waged in Shadows began.

In the midst of this stood [Tomoshibi], the representative spy room for the Republic of Deen. They are to challenge missions that had been impossible for other teams—Impassable Missions. Their newest mission was to dispose of a famous assassin called [Shikabane]. Since watching over all eight girls at the same time would prove impossible even more Ron, he chose four during an election: Grete, Lily, Zibia, and Sara, which were sent to the residence of an important politician.

However, according to him, that was nothing but a fake.

"To make things clear, the ones to fight [Shikabane] will be you four."

Tia was listening to Ron's words, together with the other three girls that had been left behind. Grete and the others were heading off to deal with the ally of [Shikabane], at a certain politician's residence. So that the enemy would not find out about Ron's absence, he kept this fact a secret from Lily and the others.

"In order to fight [Shikabane], I decided to take you four with me."

"...So that's what this was...I finally understand." Tia sighed in relief.

She apparently hadn't been cast away.

"Now everything makes sense. That's Sensei for you, a magnificent idea."

"It looked like you were blissfully unaware of that a few moments ago though?"

"Just forget about that..."

"[Shikabane] is a highly dangerous assassin. You have to always maintain your calm." Ron gave her a sharp gaze. "The most troublesome part of it is the fact that [Shikabane] kills without hesitation. To kill a single person, they would walk over the bodies of countless innocent citizens. We have to capture them without allowing any victims—that is our condition."

Be it politicians or spies, [Shikabane] had continued to murder influential people with the orders of the Empire.

"It is a harsh condition. That is why I will give you all a test."

"A test?"

"Yeah. If you don't pass it until this evening, I will not take you with me."

Tia swallowed her breath. Knowing Ron, he was not joking. He had already cleared countless missions before, so he possessed the skill and determination to carry the risks alone as he would go to challenge [Shikabane]. Ron held out his hand.

"...Touch my hand. That will be the test."

At first glance, this test was much easier than the girls' daily struggle to make Ron say 'I surrender'. But, that probably was not the case. They had half the day left in this time window, and they were four girls.

"I believe that you four can do it. You are the four strongest members that I have chosen."

".....!" A strong wave of passion passed through Tia's body.

That's right...I've worked hard. I feel bad for the other girls that didn't get chosen, but he acknowledged my skill.

Ron finally asked for their help, after continuously challenging every mission alone. That alone was enough of an honor, but being acknowledged by him even more so. She'll show him. She'll clear this test, and defeat [Shikabane].

"Leave it to me. I might have shown you a pathetic sight just now, but that was the last time. I'll respond to your trust."

"—Marvelous." Ron nodded in satisfaction.

Seeing this, Tia ran her hand through her hair. Together with her beating heart, she turned towards her allies.

"Now, everyone! Let's start our strategy meeting! We will definitely—" Her voice stopped. "...Huh?" Tia was baffled.

Her comrades had vanished. The three girls that had been sitting on the sofa mere moments ago had disappeared elsewhere.

"....." Tia was at a loss for words.

Did they return to their rooms by chance? Even though there was so much more to talk about? What about the test?

"Let me tell you one thing." Ron announced indifferently. "I have chosen you girls as you shine in your own right. However, at the same time, these three girls severely lack any intention of cooperating."

"Eh..."

"Monika, Elna, and Annette; they all have no intentions of working together with others, which led them to fail at their previous educational facilities." It all came to light. Thinking about it, there was practically nobody inside [Tomoshibi] who was especially good at cooperation with the other members.

"That being said, in order to fight against [Shikabane], the cooperation of your team members will be necessary."

"That is true, but..." An ominous premonition assaulted Tia, as Ron started walking away, almost as if to run away.

Before leaving the banquet hall, he turned around one last time.

"You go and get them under control."

"This is the important role you were talking about?!" Tia raised a shriek of despair in the face of this challenge.

Tia walked down the hallway, as she held her head in disbelief.

...That reminds me, when I was showing my leadership, the other members were always present, right.

She became aware that she had started to act like an actual leader. She consciously supported the younger team members, as the oldest in the group. Of course, she was always dubious as to why Lily had been chosen as the leader, but it was without a doubt her that supported the team with her endless energy. Tia didn't have any problems taking the lead either.

However, the current situation brought forth one big problem.

The mood makers Lily and Zibia aren't here...

Though they had been left out of this mission caused by their lack of skill, they were a crucial factor to keep up the atmosphere of the team. Lily would lighten up the mood by her clumsy actions, and Zibia would complain about that in a zesty manner. Adding Sara's cute reaction to that, the heavy atmosphere from before was gone.

Now that these girls were off to somewhere, Tia was forced to understand their importance. On top of that, the logical thinker Grete was gone as well, leaving the team in a disastrous situation.

On top of that, the rest of the members present all have their horrible habits...

Tia rubbed her forehead, as she walked down the hallway.

For now, I have to keep the complexity of the conversation as low as possible...

The first person Tia tried to reach wasn't even in her room. She apparently didn't head outside either, but she was nowhere to be found inside the place. After walking around the place for a brief moment, Tia heard sounds coming from Lily's room. Opening the door, there was a girl lying on Lily's bed.

"Hm? You got some business with me?"

It was the girl with blue-silver hair, Monika. Her codename was [Hyoujin²].

With an average height and body figure, it was hard to make out any characteristics. Her whole body clad in her clothes, you couldn't spot any quirks. She had her hair styled in an asymmetric fashion, but that couldn't be described in words either. It should look average, yet at the same time it didn't. That's the sort of atmosphere she had. Still looking like she was sleeping, Monika only turned her eyes towards Tia.

"Business...?" Tia put one hand on her hip. "What are you doing inside Lily's room anyway?"

"Investigation."

"Huh?"

Monika had paper and a pen in her hand, as she wrote something.

"Since there's barely any one here right now, I thought I might as well use this chance."

"To look through the Kagerou Palace?"

"Was just a whim, don't mind me. And, what did you want?"

As if to say that she wouldn't get into any more detail, Monika switched the topic.

"Isn't that obvious? I wanted to talk about the test."

"Ehh? Is there any need to talk about that?"

"...You're not going to challenge the test Sensei gave us?"

"Of course I am, but I don't feel like I'll be able to do that with your lot."

"! Don't just decide that on your own."

That was it. Monika's problematic personality—her arrogance that even the gods feared. She would always look down on her allies. Not knowing any restraint, she complained and insulted people whenever she felt like it. Of course, she had the skill to back it up, but that was only more frustrating. Not to mention that she was barely 16, two years younger than Tia.

"Playing cool like that is pretty pathetic, you know?" Tia's voice went up.

"No matter how arrogant and bossy you might act, since you're here in [Tomoshibi], you must have been a drop-out at your own educational facility, right?"

"Did I never tell you? I held back during the exams."

"My, is that so? The rumours of the wind told me that you were failing because you're not able to cooperate."

"Not really. The others couldn't keep up with me."

"Fufu, sounds like excuses to me."

"....." Monika didn't speak any further.

The provocation must have worked. Or so Tia had hoped, but Monika's expression was as cool as before. Instead, she offered her hand.

"Give me a coin." Monika said. "I'll flip it, so you guess what it'll land on."

"...And if I'm correct, you'll work together with me?"

"If you're wrong, then you'll be leaving."

Tia threw Monika a coin, which she accepted as she was still laying sideways. She flipped it up into the air with her fingers, and a metallic sound rang out. When the coin reached the apex of its height, Tia...

"Head." She announced.

Thus, the coin fell down—landed inside a crack of the floor, and stood upright.

"...!"

"Could you get out? I'll do it how I feel like." Monika waved her hand at Tia. Since Monika showed no shock or surprise, she must have planned for this to happen. At the same time, she had already returned to her writing. Since talking with Monika ended up in failure, Tia went to confront the second person. Unlike Monika, she should have a different personality, and different stance towards this. However, the person's fundamental abilities are the main problem.

When Tia returned to the banquet hall, a single girl was hiding in the shadow of the sofa, and only the back of her head stood out, her golden hair shining in the darkness.

"Elna, let's talk a bit."

So that Elna wouldn't be scared off, Tia spoke out to her in a kind voice. The blonde hair moved, and hid behind a different sofa. She looked like a small rabbit munching on grass.

"Elna~" Tia challenged her again.

However, the blonde hair moved away yet again. Elna showed some wonderful reflexes. Whenever Tia approached her with one step, Elna moved behind the next sofa. No matter how many times she jumped at her, she couldn't catch her target at all. After she chased her for a while—

"Ah!" A bewildered voice came from the blonde-haired girl.

Apparently, her shoe had fallen off. Mid-air, the shoe laces had reached the end of their lifetime. This led to the girl fall face-first onto the carpet.

"What misfortune..."

To make matters worse, the shoe fell right onto her head. That's what you'd expect from the probably unluckiest girl you could imagine—Elna, with her codename being [Gujin]. She had the outer appearance that made you doubt the fact that she was actually fourteen. Because of the combination of dazzling blonde hair and snow white skin, she was often described as beautiful as a doll.

"Um, even I'm going to feel hurt if you keep avoiding me like this."

"...Sorry." A faint voice came from beyond the sofa. "But, Elna feels more comfortable if she doesn't have to look someone in the eyes."

"But, aren't you normally talking a lot more?"

"Ugh...those words really sting towards someone bad at communication."

"Bad at communication?"

"T-There's lots of different types...In Elna's case, if she doesn't know the other person, she finds it easier to speak, and the more people, the more she feels like speaking as well, not to mention that she can muster up the courage greeting people that she passes-by."

"That doesn't sound like you're bad at it though...?"

"But! Talking one-on-one with comrades she's not fully used to yet...she's too scared!"

"I feel like the criteria is a bit too difficult."

"And, this 'But you've talked much more before, right?' comment makes it even more embarrassing!" Elna's slender body shook as she slowly showed herself.

What Tia gathered from this conversation is that people who are bad at communication have their own special traits. And, because of Elna's misfortunate idiosyncrasy—which actually seems to be an intro-punitive desire—she has grown up without working on her communicative ability. In this case, it probably couldn't be helped.

"The only reason Elna started to get better at talking is because of Sensei, and Sara-oneechan."

Hearing the girl's explanation, Tia shook her head. As of right now, Sara was not present. Hence, Tia herself had to make the best out of the situation.

"Then, how about we start with something simple?"

"E-Elna will try her best."

At last, they arrived at a compromise. She might have an unstable ability, but the girl herself was kind-natured.

"For example...what do you talk about with Sensei?"

"...Small, simple things." A faint voice came from Elna. "Like about the weather."

"That's nice. It shows that you two have similar personalities since you can start a conversation with that."

—Or it means that they have absolutely no repertoire for a normal conversation. Tia felt like it was the latter, but she decided not to dig any deeper.

"Do you like Sensei, Elna?"

"...Elna doesn't understand much about love. Even when she talked with Sara-oneechan, she couldn't come up with an answer."

"So you often talk with Sara about this sort of stuff?"

"Sara-oneechan is really kind. She's always considerate of Elna."

Apparently, Elna had a great amount of trust in Sara. With all these... eccentric specimens gathered in [Tomoshibi], Sara was definitely the most down to earth. Now Tia understood the relationships of the Peculiar Traits Squad. In said squad, Sara must have the duty to keep it all together. That would mean that Sara was mostly responsible for the other girl as well. Hence, in order to win over the third girl, Tia first needed to get some more information out of Elna. After going through two, three idle topics, she decided to bring up the main topic.

"So, Elna. About this test..."

"Amazing...Elna's been talking for five minutes."

However, that judgement proved to be fatal. Elna's expression lit up, as she just stared at the ceiling. A bit of fatigue resided in her voice.

"...Elna is tired, so she'll take a rest now."

"We've barely been talking for five minutes though?!" Tia tried to stress, but Elna already stopped listening.

Without a moment's notice, she left Tia behind in the banquet hall.

To think she would get rejected twice in a row. Tia's limbs felt heavy, and exhausted. She had mentally prepared herself, but the difficulty was far too high. She would have never imagined to find this much resistance from these two girls.

Working together won't even work at this rate...

This is a problem even before trying to challenge [Shikabane]. The second they can't arrive at common ground, their mission will be a failure for certain.

Not to mention that the last girl might be the most worrisome...

The greatest problem child of [Tomoshihi]. In this team of gathered irregulars, she is very likely to be the most distinctive.

No, I can't give up without even trying! We're comrades, I'm sure it'll get through!

Tia forced herself to get the failed attempts leading up to this point.

I can do this! After all, Sensei instructed me to!

Tia slapped her cheeks, and headed to the private room of the remaining girl. Said room was located in the depths of the Kagerou Palace. At first, she had been pretty much in the center, but because of the noise, she was ordered to move there. The door was opened fully, showing no signs of any care about privacy. Be it during her sleep, or while she's changing clothes, she would not close the doors at any given moment.

Tia knocked on the wall, and entered the room. The person in question was sleeping inside the room...hanging upside down.

"....."

The scent of oil stimulated Tia's nose. A great number of machinery was gathered inside this oddly spacious room. Though it only looked like junk and rubbish, they must have some important application. There were engines or gears, copper wire, even metal springs all mixed together, creating one big mountain.

Looking closer at this mountain, Tia spotted something that resembled a bed. Unable to use this bed because of all the junk, she probably used a hammock to create a sleeping position for herself. Half of her body had fallen off, which led her to end up in this position.

"Annette, get up, will you. If you sleep too much during the day, you won't be able to fall asleep at night." Holding back the desire to just leave this room right away, Tia softly shook the girl's shoulder.

Barely a second later, the girl's eyes shot open, as she removed the hammock around her legs. Right when Tia moved in to catch the girl, she herself twisted her body, and landed beautifully on the floor.

"I have awoken!"

So said the girl with ashen-pink hair—Annette.

She had an eccentric outer appearance you wouldn't expect from a spy. She had her long hair tied up in two, forcefully wearing it in braids. Probably as a result of a past injury, she wore an eyepatch, which made her stand out even further. At the very least, you wouldn't assume a spy to have an appearance like her.

"Hey, Annette, for starters—"

"Ah, Aneki." Annette showed a calm smile. "You're standing on one of the bombs I made."

"What are you keeping in your own room like this?!"

“From the right, four knife-type stun guns, a pencil-type gas burner, a bazooka that can break through anything, and three super parachutes—”

“I wasn’t asking for details!” In a panic, Tia moved away from the machinery on the ground, seemingly all Annette’s inventions.

Feeling like she was moving through a minefield, Tia walked over the floor towards Annette.

“Annette, I have a question. Why did you go back to your room just now?” Annette picked up a milk bottle from the ground, and held it towards the ceiling.

“I felt like drinking some milk!”

“Ah, I see...”

Tia didn’t even have the energy to get angry at her. Where should she even start?

“Annette, the next time you leave, at least let me know, okay?”

“Understood!”

“We’ll have to face a harsh mission as well this time, are you going to be okay?”

“Understood!”

“...Are you just giving random answers now?”

“Am not!”

“Jump.”

“Understood!” Annette jumped into the air.

“Turn around.”

“Understood!” Annette did a turn.

“Strip.”

“Understood!” Annette was about to take off her clothes, only to be stopped by Tia.

“How does your brain even work...” Tia held her head in disbelief.



As for Annette's special features—She was too pure, too wild and free, making reading her thoughts close to impossible. Whenever she should be doubtful of something, she would just honestly do as she was told. Even when she was informed of her departure to this dangerous mission, she showed no sign of worry and anxiety. No matter the order, she would follow. Or so you would think, but at times she would deny it because she felt like it. Not to mention her curiosity as she goes to invent stuff as all this machinery all the time.

According to Ron, she has no memories from before she started attending the educational facility. Her codename [Bouga] was a perfect fit for this⁴. On the documents, it states that she is fourteen years old, but her real age is a mystery. With no memories of her own, and no certificates to give any sort of information, she had been under guardianship. Possessing puzzling thought processes and no information about herself—that was the girl called Annette.

But, I have to talk things out with her, or else...

When Tia hesitated on what to do, Annette tilted her head in confusion.

"Tia-aneki, are you feeling unwell?"

"Yes, a bit to be honest."

Without restraint, Annette slapped her hand on Tia's cheeks, and followed that up with a nonchalant 'Yup, the great me says no fever!'. Be it tone, her looks, or actions, everything was unguessable. Yet, Annette apparently had caught on to Tia's physical condition. At least she has a certain level of affection towards her comrades. And, Tia bet on this.

"Hey, Annette. I'm having some trouble with the test Sensei gave us. Could you help me?"

"Ah, I already attempted that!"

"Eh?"

That was unexpected. If anything, Tia assumed that she had forgotten about the test already.

"Tell me. What did you try?"

"I asked Ron-aniki to let me touch his hand."

"Eh..."

"But, he said no."

Of course he would. Otherwise this wouldn't have been a test in the first place.

"Alright, I'm off to sleep!" Annette declared, and climbed up on the hammock again.

As before, her upper body was dangling in the air, yet she looked as comfortable as ever.

"....."

Tia heard the sound of her heart break.

"This is impossible...I can't get all of these members together until the end of the test..."

Tia crouched down in front of a mouse cage. She had believed that, with her skilled leadership, she would be able to bring together her other comrades who didn't think much of cooperation—but that fantasy had rotted away now. It reminded her that the only reason she managed to act as a good leader was because of the other girls, who were all not present at this moment in time. Never would she have imagined however that she would be this helpless with nobody reasonable around.

She felt like crying. She couldn't handle this.

"They're not working with me at all...Even though I'm trying my best..."

"That doesn't mean you should just come to my place."

The one to answer Tia's strained complaint was none other than Ron, as he held a mouse in his arms. In reality, the Kagerou Palace had a small animal hut outside the main building. Originally, this had acted as a storehouse, but thanks to the renovations of the animal-loving girl Sara, a lot of small animals were now kept in here. There even were a falcon or a dog here normally, but now with Sara gone on a mission, they went with her. Now it was just five mice present.

"Until noon has passed, I have to pass these mice on to the handler, so I don't have any time to spend with you." Ron said with an annoyed tone. Since Ron and the others were planning to depart the following day, they had to be given in someone else's care—Of course, assuming that Tia and the others pass the test. That's why the Boss was dealing with some preparations himself, and couldn't even face Tia directly.

"Taking your previous reaction into consideration, your mental state can take some serious damage at times, I see."

"...I'm aware of that."

This wasn't the first time where she couldn't hold her psyche together. When another lesson with Ron ended up in failure, she would often sulk.

"Hey, Sensei..." Tia let out a sugary voice. "Will you comfort me?"

"I decline." Ron didn't even hesitate.

"...This is the first time a man said these words to me after I showed myself like this."

"And what kind of men are we talking about then?"

"All of them were wonderful. They continued to praise me all night—until the morning."

"So that's the reason for your weak psyche I see."

Hearing these indifferent words of Ron, Tia showed him a hateful gaze. She had confidence in her looks. When she walked outside along the city streets, she would gather the gazes of the men around her, and if she initiated the conversation, 90% of men immediately fell for it. Even in the midst of [Tomoshibi], she had the confidence that she wouldn't lose against anyone. Yet, it didn't work against Ron.

All the times she tried to seduce him, she was flatly rejected by him.

"Why not restrain yourself some more? That tendency of yours led to your grades dropping in the educational facility, right?"

"...How could I have known that the instructor had a wife."

"You created a battlefield, huh."

"I'm never going through that again. I'll learn to hold back in the future."

This was the reason why Tia had been branded as a drop-out. Sleeping with whatever man which traversed the city, and even spending the night with an instructor. From her point of view, this was part of her training as a spy. However, crossing the line has earned her antipathy from the other instructors, lowering her grades.

"Either way, if you don't pass the test, I won't be taking you all with me. If you'll participate in the mission with no cooperation between the lot of you, all that awaits you is death." Ron's voice had a lot of pressure. "In the worst case scenario, I will head there alone."

"..."

"However, that will raise the risks. Namely that [Shikabane] will kill innocent people."

Yet again, Tia was reminded of the responsibility she had to carry. If she and the other girls didn't pass the test, innocent citizens would die. This is the pressure always weighing down on a spy's shoulders. Nobody expected Ron to lose against [Shikabane]. However, since [Shikabane] is a first-rate assassin, they would have no hesitation to kill townsfolk. In order to avoid that, Ron needs more people behind him.

"....."

Tia reached out for Ron's right hand, who was still busy with his work. However, he evaded her with ease. She tried touching his hand again and again, but she couldn't reach his speed. She even pushed over a basket filled with water, letting out a seductive voice, but Ron just ignored her. He had no interest whatsoever in watching her bodyline emphasized by her drenched clothes glued to herself.

Just as she thought, passing this test alone will prove impossible. She needed the assistance of her allies. But, how? How should she cooperate with people that couldn't even be bothered to hold a normal conversation with her?

"Tia."

When Tia bit her lip in helplessness, Ron called out to her.

"You knew an awful lot about [Homura]. Why was that?"

It was a sudden change of subject.

"Mmm, well. I actually had a single connection to them." Tia nodded.

She had told Ron many times that she herself admired [Homura].

"Seven years ago, I was saved by [Homura]. Do you remember? The daughter of an important newspaper company president was abducted back then."

"...I wonder. I might have been on another mission."

"That must have been it, then. A crimson-haired woman told me about [Homura]." Tia subconsciously smiled. "She talked with me when I couldn't sleep, a very kind person. I admire her, because she saved my life."

Ron gave her a surprised gaze.

"A crimson-haired woman...Revealing top-secret secret information as bedtime stories, she seems to be quite the rule breaker."

"Do you know her, Sensei?"

"Yeah, her codename was [Kouro]—and she was the former boss of [Homura]."

"Eh?" A confused voice came from Tia.

She had always assumed her to be much younger than the rest, but to think she was the boss of that legendary spy team. Ron narrowed his eyes, and showed a nostalgic expression.

"Tia, were you close with someone from [Homura]?"

"Eh..."

"Even in a team like [Homura], which was like a family to me, there was a time when we didn't agree on something, and got into a fight. Even the kind Boss had a serious expression when we got down to business. Everyone had their own opinion, and not rarely did we all agree on the same thing."

"That's a bit unexpected."

"But, I don't think of this as a bad thing." Ron announced with confidence in his voice. "—Enjoy all confrontation. They are the key to keep your team together."

These were the words Tia had to remember, and carve into her chest.

"My boss told me these words. She told me to face your comrades head-on." These were [Kouro]'s words, and they induced a sharp shock inside Tia's heart.

When Tia left the small shed, she spotted Monika, she had a wrench in her hand. Before Tia could say anything, Monika already returned to the residence.

...What has she been up to?

Monika said she would be working independently, but it pissed Tia off that no information was shared. Thinking about it for a moment, Tia headed to Lily's room, the place she previously met Monika.

She mentioned that she was looking into a few things. Maybe Tia might be able to find out something if she followed Monika. Although you wouldn't believe it from the person in question, Lily's room was unexpectedly organized and tidy. On the walls she had medicine, probably antidotes immediately ready and necessary for a poison user. She might not look like it, but Lily is through at the core.

However, only a small piece of paper had fallen to the floor, something that didn't seem like it would be Lily's doing.

Some memo Monika left here...?

Opening the paper, Tia was greeted by an onslaught of information.

‘Water way: Yard, kitchen, bathroom, large public bath X, Washing room’
It was information regarding the Kagerou Palace. Why was Monika looking into something like that? Why was there a big [X] next to the large public bath? Not next to Ron’s private bathroom, but the girls’ large public bath? Tracing the words written on the paper, Tia arrived at an unexpected piece of information.

‘Lily: A large private room. Previous owner was former boss?’

Tia raised her head. Monika was looking into [Homura]? Just as the girl found out, Tia became aware that Lily’s room was indeed bigger than the rest. Probably because it was a corner room on the second floor. Even the inside looked more luxurious, as the bed gave away. It was a room belonging to people one rank above others.

“So Lily’s room formerly belonged to [Kouro]-san?”

This place definitely had more exposure to the sun than Ron’s room. With mixed feelings, Tia looked around the room in a daze.

This is...the room of the person I admired...the reason I aimed to become a spy in the first place...

It was the room of the person who saved Tia from the hell she had been in. She was warm and comfortable like a soothing sunlight, melting away Tia’s anxiety and fear, possessing the beauty and strength of raging flames—That was the woman she adored, and now she stood in her room. Inside Tia’s heart, the words of the promise she received still remained.

‘Continue to hone your skills, and you will become a spy stronger than anybody else.’

‘But, I don’t want you to just become another spy.’

‘Instead, aim to become a hero.’

‘If you keep this promise, I’ll give you a wonderful present once we meet again.’

Though fate did not allow a reunion, the words Tia received from her still lived on inside of her. She continued to hone her skills. She didn’t keep all those relationships with men for nothing. It was all to make her own talent bloom. She had not once thrown away her ideals.

—Become a hero. Just like that crimson-haired spy that had previously saved Tia’s life.

“...[Kouro]-san, you also fought lots with your members, right?”

She regained her calm psyche, and swore it inside the room of the person she admired. What was necessary to succeed was unparalleled self-assertion to pull others towards her.

“You’ve protected the citizens of this country for so long, and now it’s my turn—With the strength you’ve entrusted me.” With a charming smile, Tia declared. “Codename [Yumegatari] — It is time to draw sympathy and wreck it all.”

Elna was making lunch in the kitchen. Challenging the test with an empty stomach wouldn't work out. Even as the number of girls was halved, making food was a great operation. They had to make it themselves after all. Apparently, Lily and the others were currently working as maids. Making food was a crucial part of being a spy.

"....."

That being said, Elna couldn't focus at all. Her head was in a mess. There came Elna's habit into action—An intracerebral reflection meeting started to take place.

....Elna went and ran away from Tia-oneechan.

Indeed, Elna was in a depressed state, wondering if what she did might have hurt Tia.

Elna should have continued to talk with her...

She could have probably participated more in the conversation, showed a cute smile on top. That's how she continued to reflect and regret. There was a time when Ron told her to be more open and cooperative. Back when they defeated Guido, Elna managed to perfectly work together with Lily. However, with Lily being a rather pushy person, having barely any delicacy, Elna didn't have to work too hard. She would have liked to work together again like that...

But...

Before she could make up her mind, she subconsciously stepped on the brakes.

It would be better for Elna to stay away because of her misfortune...if not...

When Elna imagined all the calamity possible to happen because of her cursed existence, a voice came from behind her back.

"My, if it isn't Elna."

"!"

Elna didn't catch on to somebody sneaking up at her. Tia snickered.

"You don't have to be so scared. Is it your turn to cook? Who's the other one?"

"Monika-oneechan. She left a note that said 'Wait a sec', and vanished."

"Is she skipping work again? For crying out loud," Tia complained, as she pouted.

She probably aimed to show her kindness and reliability, but Elna wasn't even paying attention to that. If anything, her pounding heart grabbed all her attention, because someone she wasn't familiar with suddenly invaded her private space. Not to mention that she was inside the kitchen, with no place to escape to. But, becoming aware that she felt the urge to run away, Elna shook her head.

N-No. Elna has to act courageous now—

Right when Elna tried to open her mouth, Tia snickered.

"Hey, Elna. Do you want to be on close terms with me?" She spoke with a calm voice, like an adult.

Almost as if to restrain Elna even further.

"Be honest with me. You would even be ready to reveal what's inside your heart in order to be on good terms with me, wouldn't you?"

"That's..." Elna hesitated for a second. "...Elna wants to."

"Very good. Then, put up with it for three seconds."

"Mm?"

"For three seconds, I want you to look me in the eyes."

Right as she finished her words, Tia already reached out both her hands towards Elna. Although her body instinctively tried to dodge, Elna held back her desire to do so. Tia's fingers held on to Elna's cheeks as if to softly embrace them. Her fingers were cold. They had the posture of a couple about to share a kiss, as Tia's obsidian-colored eyes stared directly at Elna, who slowly raised her head.

"Just like that." Tia softly whispered.

Her voice directly penetrated Elna's brain, about to go numb from the shame. The time was set to three seconds. However, to Elna, it felt like a million times the amount. It made her wonder if all lovers in this world felt the same, as her heart beat annoyingly loud. Tia's eyes gazed right into hers, almost as if they saw right into Elna, who felt a shiver from this.

—It was like Tia took a peek at Elna's heart as a whole.

"Elna." Her glistening lips moved. "You really are cute."

Three seconds seemed to have passed, because Tia slowly removed her hands. Elna could finally take a breather. In that tense atmosphere, she even forgot to breathe. Just what happened? As Elna showed visible confusion, Tia—

"...You want an actual Onee-chan?"

"!"

"Is that why you call us all with 'Onee-chan'? What a spoiled child, you must have been aware of it, right? That your mental state is much younger compared to other children your age. How troublesome. You hold back the desire to be spoiled, not show it openly, and discipline yourself." Tia kept talking on and on.

Elements of scorn and ridicule, even tease were packed into her voice. As if she rudely trampled on top of Elna's heart. She felt her chest tighten up.

Tia's analysis was awfully hitting close to home.

"That's..."

A sense of uneasiness assaulted Elna, forcing her to raise her voice.

"...Not it. Elna just doesn't want anyone to be wrapped up in her misfortune..."

"And that's why you can be granted this desire of yours. Ever since you were young, right?" Tia showed a laugh of scorn. "...How childish."

Elna's face burned up immediately. Was it shame, or anger? It was a mixture of many feelings.

—Why does Elna have to listen to this?

At a young age, Elna had lost her family. A scorching fire robbed her of her parents, siblings, and only left her alone. When the other children were out

playing with their parents, Elna was all alone. She killed off the desire to be spoiled. She was convinced that, being the only survivor, it wouldn't be fair for her to be happy. Even though her brothers and sisters couldn't even smile anymore, why would she be allowed to be blessed by happiness— That is why she was attracted to locations and places that had the tendency to be wrapped up in accidents, the habit to wish for someone to punish her. She suffered from subconscious intropunitive tendencies. With a mixture of self-hate and a desire for atonement, she decided to set foot into the cruel world of spies. So what gives Tia the right to laugh about all the suffering Elna went through!

"You're wrong, Elna just—"

"It's fine. I'll become your Onee-chan, Elna."

However, Elna's anger was suppressed by Tia embracing her. She found herself inside Tia's chest, as a nostalgic sensation and scent stimulated Elna's tip of her nose.

"I'll keep it a secret from the other members. You can let out all the tears, my adorable Imouto-chan?"

"Mm..."

"No need to be embarrassed, just become honest. Throw away your reason." Tia whispered into Elna's ears at a close distance, her voice reverberating inside her head. **"I'll accept your every desire that you have to keep a secret from everyone."**

Tia kindly ran her hands down Elna's back, gently rubbing her with a comfortable touch. Elna hadn't felt anything like this before in her life. The muscles in her back were quivering. Fear? At being forcefully changed? But, she couldn't fight against it.

Hearing the words 'Imouto-chan' come from Tia's charming lips, Elna felt like lighting ran through her body. The desire of hearing these words again slowly crept through the openings of her crumbling heart. That was all her head carried her to, leaving her unable to think about anything after that. Elna felt like she was inside a blanket, as the soft sensation of Tia's chest made her head space out. She relaxed her body, and just entrusted herself to Tia—

Elna was at a loss of strength inside Tia's arms, her eyes devoid of any light. Confirming this, Tia sighed in relief. It all went according to plan. It was a skill she rarely used with people of the same sex or someone younger than her, but it seemed to have worked just fine. The warmth coming from Elna told her enough. All wariness towards Tia had vanished.

At the appropriate time, Tia released Elna. Though she seemed reluctant to part, after rubbing her head a few times, Elna blushed ever so slightly and returned to her lunch preparations. Having left the kitchen, Tia ran into Monika, who leaned against the hallway wall, giving her a dejected expression.

"What did you do to Elna?"

Tia had been seen from the sounds of it. It would make sense, seeing that Monika was on duty as well. But, Tia just softly shook her head.

"It was just a small skill of mine. Nothing I can brag about."

Tia's special skill—That is to efficiently read the wishes of other people. Using this, she could find out what kind of secret desires the other person held, as well as what they wished Tia to do. It wasn't detailed by any means, but she could pick up the vague idea. From sexual desire to hidden ambitions, using this information the right way, she was able to win over almost anybody.

—This made her a specialist at negotiation. That was the skill [Kouro] praised her about.

"I don't mind telling you. It's a skill that can win over any man. Do you want me to teach you? Thoroughly, of course."

"I ain't got a single ounce of interest, no."

"No need to worry. I was the one who taught the means of seduction to Grete so that she could win over Sensei's heart!"

"So you were the one who told her to sexually harass him?"

"What are you saying! You're insulting Grete's efforts!"

Monika showed a cold smile.

"I don't need that. Sounds like a pain to use. And, if it was really that good, you could have defeated Ron-san yourself."

"I hate that you can immediately find a rebuttal for everything..."

That's right, just as Monika hinted at, Tia's special skill had certain conditions.

—To exchange eye contact with the other person for three seconds. This made dealing with any men that had an interest in her fairly easy. But, if it was someone like Ron, who was always wary as a constant state of being, that wouldn't work. Once Tia and the other person were on hostile terms, her talent was useless. That being said, as long as she could complete this condition, it would work. Even towards an awfully arrogant Monika...

"What's that glare for, hm?" Monika showed a dry smile.

As if she had caught on to Tia's intentions, she showed a challenging grin.

"Wanna try it on me? Sure, go ahead. Win me over."

"...No thank you. I wouldn't use it on my comrades who aren't truly consenting to it."

It was a rule she had set on herself. Endlessly reading someone else's heart would only bring misfortune as a result.

"Monika, if you have no intentions of working together with us, then I won't bother you anymore. I'll act freely myself, so don't pull me down."

"Really now, how boring." Monika had her palm face the ceiling, showing a mocking gesture. "If you don't like me, why not use brute force to get rid of me?"

"What are you saying...?"

Tia thought it was a joke, or even provocation. However, Monika's eyes showed neither of that. It was pity. It felt like Monika was looking at Tia with no interest in the world.

"...Really, only good girls in this team."

"Huh?"

"The one that is most serious is you. A noble lady that had fallen because of illicit intercourse—Really, it makes me want to puke." Monika sighed. "But, I guess the naive ones are everyone. Cruelty—a harshness essential for a spy is missing from this spy team. I can't help but feel worried, you know. We're supposed to fight a fiendish enemy like this?"

With these words, Monika vanished down the hallway. During that moment, Tia spotted the wrench in Monika's hands. She might have been in the middle of some work.

"Well, if you're that much of a good kid, why not do some babysitting?" Only Monika's voice arrived at Tia's ears.

"...Just what is she trying to say." Tia had been insulted one-sidedly, because of some vague reason she couldn't even fully grasp.

Though her heart started to feel a bit gloomy because of that, she didn't have the time to pay attention to this girl for now. Knowing her personality, the more you left her alone, the better things would go in the end, no doubt. There was another problem Tia had to prioritize, namely another comrade she wanted to cooperate with.

Every single girl of [Tomoshibi] possessed a certain skill, an ability that made them special. Originally, that must have been the key to defeating Guido, only used against him because he couldn't have had any information on them.

There's Lily's poison, Grete's disguises, Zibia's stealing ability, and Tia's skillful negotiations—They were all abilities nobody would be able to copy, come to life because of their various origins and lives so far.

And, in [Tomoshibi], there are three girls that possess skills that even surpass the others'. Though they may not be useful in actual combat, their value cannot be disregarded. That being said, their psyche had yet to fully grow, which meant that they couldn't be left alone, but enough that they could offer support.

Ron had gathered these three girls, and turned them into a squad—the Peculiar Traits squad. It consisted of Sara, and her ability to train animals, Elna's sense for accidents, and Annette's—

Tia believed that out of all of them, Annette herself was breaking the rules.

For once, Annette wasn't in her own room, but rather in the washroom. Tia assumed she'd be on the toilet, but in reality she was crouching down beneath the washbasin, holding a screwdriver with both hands. When Tia approached her, Annette turned over her head with some insane speed, and looked at her.

“Ah, Tia-aneki!”

“What are you doing?”

“I broke the faucet so I’m now repairing it!”

At Annette’s feet, she had several parts of the basin. Tools to repair the faucet most likely. But, what pulled in Tia’s interest even further...

“Aren’t there more faucets than before?”

The faucet of the washbasin Tia was so familiar with, had suddenly grown three extra faucets. Every single one at an equal angle. Tia couldn’t even tell which one was the original one.

“They look exactly like a normal faucet, but only one is the real one, and the others will induce an explosion.”

“...You really are a genius.” Tia let out a sigh without even meaning to.

That was Annette’s special skill—Handicraft. From this overflowing curiosity came her talent at machinery. Be it the production of spy tools, over to electricity and waterway work, her wide knowledge contained almost everything. This brought forth a strength of Annette.

—All of Annette’s inventions greatly crossed the level of what the Republic produced. All she can think of is recreating the machinery of other countries, or even the one held secret in the Republic. The girl herself doesn’t remember her place of birth, but only her scientific skills stayed with her this entire time. That was the reason why she had been scouted to join the spy educational facility.

If we could use that skill of hers for our spy activities...!

Tia felt impatient. The girl herself only thought of using this skill for pranks, or to spend time. Whenever she actually felt motivated, she could create something truly magnificent.

I will be the one to guide her.

Preparing herself mentally, Tia raised her voice.

“Hey, Annette.”

“What is it?”

“Would you like to get along even better with me? Even if it means revealing what’s inside your heart a bit?”

“.....” While she kept a smile, Annette froze up.

Like a machine that had stopped working, she didn’t move a muscle. Her eyes, looking like glass crystals, focussed on Tia, but she couldn’t read anything from that.

“Yes! I want to become even closer with Aneki!” After a brief silence, Annette consented.

Tia sighed in the face of this small success.

“I see. Then, could you look me in the eyes?”

She reached out for Annette’s cheeks, and grabbed them like she was embracing her face. It looked Annette was a bit ticklish there, so Tia put a bit more force into her grip. Finally, Annette met gazes with Tia.

“...Don’t move, okay?”

At a distance of around 30 centimeters between them, they were facing each other. Annette did have an eyepatch on one eye, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. There, Tia felt her body shiver. It was an experience that had never happened before.

...My body is afraid? Afraid of reading Annette's heart?

As the beating of her heart accelerated, she felt an emotion comparable to fear. But, she didn't know why, but she felt her sense of danger running wild being this close to Annette.

No, this isn't the time to be nervous...I have to face my comrades head-on.

The one who had shaken away her fear was the hero she admired so much.

...Because that is my only way to get any closer to [Kouro]-san.

Three seconds passed, as Tia gazed deep into Annette's eyes—

".....Eh."

—And Tia arrived at a conclusion that left her baffled.

"What's wrong?" Annette showed a pure face. "Did you read my heart?"

Tia was lost for words. The desire that she saw was too far from anything she could have imagined.

She wants...something like that? That is the piece of evidence I needed to control her?

"U-Um..." Tia swallowed her spit.

"Yes?"

"I've been wondering for a while now, but..." Tia really didn't want to, but the situation forced her to ask anyway. "...Did you...grow?"

Like a blooming flower, Annette's face lit up.

"That's Tia-aneki for you! You could tell?" Annette jumped, clinging to Tia's neck. "You're correct! The great me has grown a whole three millimeters since last month. And two centimeters since last year! I'm growing super duper! It's because I changed my sleeping posture!"

So that's why she hung upside down in her room. As for Annette herself, she grinned and slapped Tia on the back. It was like an innocent young child's way of playing around.

"....."

However, Tia's feelings were far more complicated than that.

—I want to grow more.

Although Tia should have found out the deepest desire of Annette through this, allowing her to grasp more of the mysterious girl, she felt like more questions were raised than answered. She could not find any path to success in uncovering the girl. If anything, it felt like she looked into the heart of a five year-old.

—Her heart was completely empty.

For now, Tia said she'd make some milk pudding for Annette if they succeed at the test. Annette said 'I want to grow even more', and cheerfully agreed to help Tia.

Though there were ups and downs, Tia managed to secure the help of two out of the three girls. In her own private, she proudly announced.

"Now, everyone! It's time to clear this test!!"

And, unlike before, she received energetic answers back.

"Yup!" "The great me will try my best!"

Elna and Annette raised their right fists towards the sky. Tia felt her eyes starting to water up.

"Tia-oneechan, what's wrong...?" Elna has, not any more wary of Tia.

"I was just thinking how far we came..."

"...?"

Annette and Elna both tilted their heads at the same time. Tia felt exhausted, even though they hadn't even challenged the test yet.

"Anyway...I got some information just now. Lily's room actually belonged to the previous boss of [Homura]. I'll use that as an excuse to call Sensei over.

Annette, you set up traps inside Lily's room. Elna, you will have to avoid these traps to the bare limit, and touch Sensei's hand." Announcing the

plan, Tia clapped her hands. "Now, let's go! It's time to show him our skill!"

Tia guided Annette and Elna to Lily's room, and looked for Ron. She quickly found out that he was currently in the bathroom, possibly taking a shower, as she heard sounds. If he was really taking a shower, then she had to wait.

Worrying about the time loss, Tia dashed off to the bathroom. Thinking of attacking Ron if he was currently changing, she jumped into the room—

"And, that's that done."

Inside the changing room, Monika was exchanging a touch with Ron. It sounded like a soft punch.

"Eh...?" Tia froze up with her mouth open.

Monika washed her hands at the washbasin, and gave a chuckle.

"Good work. Then, I'll go ahead and eat some lunch."

"W-Wait a second! W-Why?" Tia grabbed Monika's arm in a panic. "And why are you just letting her touch your hand, Sensei?!"

Tia was absolutely lost on what just happened. The difficult problem that Tia and the other two desperately tried to solve was cleared by Monika with no problems whatsoever.

"Hm?" Ron had a suspicious expression. "You were not working together?"

"N-No. Monika just..."

"I see, that makes sense." Ron nodded in agreement, but Tia still couldn't follow the situation.

"How did Monika manage to pass the test...?"

"During the day, there are times when someone is defenseless. Monika saw through that, and used it for her own convenience." Ron continued with a saddened tone in his nose. "To be precise, the moment I went to wash my hands."

Even that didn't help Tia understand the circumstances. Monika managed to win against Ron in a one-on-one. That is what she was forced to grasp, but...

"I didn't do much." Monika wiped her hands with a handkerchief. "You don't need any great plan to touch his hands. Just barge in when he's washing his

hands. If anything, I'm kinda pissed that you missed the greatest chance just like that."

"W-What do you mean..."

"Ron-san went to touch the animals, right? Of course he'd watch his hands right after."

"Ah..."

"I even gave you a hint, about all the waterways in the Kagerou Palace." Monika spoke with confidence.

Together with these words, all memories inside Tia formed together like a puzzle.

"The waterway in the yard I destroyed myself. Elna was present in the kitchen, and I had Annette head to the washing room. Since Sensei ain't approaching the large bath for us girls, there's only the bathroom for Sensei to wash his hands, right?"

When Tia walked through the yard, Monika had a wrench in her hands. She had Elna take care of the food alone, and Annette was repairing the washroom's water supply. She limited the places for Ron to wash his hands. Once Ron would make it to a place where he can wash his hands, that's the natural action, because he had touched the mice before.

"I told you, right? That I had to finish sending the pets to the handler. I didn't have the time to waste, so I could only offer her my hand."

The choices Ron had were to shoo the girl away without washing his hands, or giving up. Since Ron had a time limit to work with as well, he apparently chose the latter.

"Thanks a bunch, you all turned into a great diversion." Monika tapped her hand on Tia's shoulder.

"D-Diversion..."

"That memo I left in Lily's room was some great encouragement, right? And that helped me as well, since you went and babysit the other two."

She must have heard Tia's conversation with Ron inside the small shed.

"Y-You! If you had a plan like that, then tell us!"

Knowing that she just played right into Monika's hands, Tia's head burned up.

"Huh? Isn't this the moment where you should actually thank me? No, apologize? Didn't you tell me not to 'Pull you down'? How's that coming along?"

"~~~!" Tia let out a shriek that couldn't be put into words.

In reality, she wanted to scream and complain. But, in this case, Monika was definitely on the righteous side. So, when she was desperately looking for words—

"Marvelous."

She heard Ron's satisfied voice.

"This is just fine, you all." He clapped.

Apparently, that was a result satisfying enough. But, Tia was left confused.

"You're okay with this? I don't think you could call this proper cooperation..."

"I never once expected you to work together."

"How harsh...Though you're totally right about that!"

"The other four girls who aren't present right now possess this ability, to a level the rest of you probably would never be able to achieve."

That was, without a doubt, the cold hard truth. Lily and the others surely were fine on their own, coming up with plans themselves. Tia felt jealous, she wanted to work with them instead.

"We are much stronger than those who can operate well together. I told Tia about this, but being on different opinions with your team is the key. What I want from you all is to bare your egos, and cooperate as you clash."

"Clash..."

"Make your comrades your allies, and aim for success, Tia. And Monika, you throw away cooperation, and use your comrades the most efficient way.

Both of these are—Marvelous." Ron nodded. "You will grow as you face off against each other. Like this, we will challenge [Shikabane]."

A sigh escaped from Tia's lips. For now, it seems like they earned the right to participate in the mission.

"Good for you, that you can participate as leftovers."

"You..."

Monika was definitely looking down on her. Almost like she wanted to say that Tia and the others passed solely because of Monika's actions. But, since that was basically the case, she could only grit her teeth and live through this shame.

"Tia-aneki!"

Then, Annette's face peeked into the room from the hallway.

"We've been waiting for Ron-aniki. Is he going to be coming soon?"

Tia had fully forgotten that Annette and Elna were still on stand-by.

"Sorry. Monika already passed the test for us."

"Hmpf. What a shame!" Annette said, but showed a smile looking like she wasn't bothered too much. "Even though I set up a trap that if you twist the wrong door doorknob in the wrong direction, you'll make the place explode!"

"You really love explosions, huh..."

This was Lily's room they were talking about, of all things. Since [Kouro] had previously used that room, Tia would have hated it if something happened to it.

"I'm sorry, but could you remove that trap right away?"

"The great me requests milk pudding before that!"

"How forceful...But, disarming it comes first. What would happen if it accidentally went off?"

"Objection! Only someone with horrible luck would be able to set it off!"

Though that wasn't exactly the problem, Annette's words were trustworthy. Why? Because her inventions and skill were perfect. Not once did

something accidentally blow up, and everybody would be suspicious when there were more doorknobs on the door. And even then, there's a 50% chance that the explosion could be avoided.

"That reminds me, where's Elna?"

Ron raised a dubious voice. Right after that, an impact occurred, shaking the entire residence.

"""" """"

A loud explosion rang out, with black smoke filling the hallway. In a rush, Tia opened the windows, and looked outside, but she couldn't see any fire from the outside. Around the time the ventilation came to an end, the members rushed to the scene of the catastrophe. Just as they suspected, the explosion happened in Lily's room. In front of the room, with the door blown away, laid Elna, completely black from the smoke and dirt.

"...What misfortune."

Elna seemed to be alive at least. That's her reflexes for her, able to dodge an explosion like that.

"...When Elna came back from the toilet, there was another doorknob."

She happened to twist it, it seems. Not to mention the wrong one.

"On top of that...the waterway in the toilet exploded as well..."

She suffered from a consecutive streak of misfortune. Taking a peek inside Lily's room, a tragedy opened up. Windows and outer walls were all completely broken down, allowing you to see the scenery outside. The bed and closets had fallen down on the yard. The poison and antidotes she had gathered laid scattered on the ground.

"So...what should we do about this?" Tia was at a loss for words.

"According to my judgement," Monika crossed her arms. "Isn't Elna at fault, for setting it off despite knowing how unlucky she is?"

"It's Annette's fault for putting in this much blasting powder!"

"The great me just followed Tia-aneki's orders!"

"E-Ehhhh?"

As the tables suddenly turned against Tia, she was desperately looking for an excuse.

"We could have prevented this if Monika had just cooperated with us from the very beginning!"

"I'm definitely not gonna take the blame here, alright!" Monika let out a roar of anger.

"Don't say that. Just look at Sensei, and what your actions have done to him!" Tia pointed at Ron. "The room of a woman he has admired was just blown to smithereens, and he is forced to watch this disastrous scene!"

"....."

A calm expression resided on Ron's face.

"Don't worry." He muttered. "I'm holding back the tears."

"Isn't this too much of a shock?"

Normally, you would never hear such words coming out of Ron's mouth. And, another person who had an equally devastated reaction was Tia.

[Kouro]-san's room...

She had planned to talk to Lily and maybe change rooms, but now that was gone.

"...Let me rephrase my statement." Ron spoke up. "I won't tell you to get along...However, maybe work a bit on that cooperation of yours." His voice sounded dejected like never before.

Intermission: Whereabouts (1)

"—And that's what happened." Ron finished his explanation. It was the events that led up to the battle of [Shikabane], and the destruction of Lily's room.

"""" """"

The four members were at a loss for words.

"How do I say it, what a crazy group you had with you." Zibia scratched her cheek. "In a lot of ways..."

"Very...individual." Sara nodded. "It must have been tough getting them all together."

"I did have a lot of trouble with that, yes." Ron crossed his arms, letting out a sigh.

Though Tia was the one ultimately gathering them, she eventually suffered mental damage, which left Ron to clean up after her.

"However, they each possessed high individual skill. That's what allowed us to finish the mission with no problems whatsoever."

"But why did my room have to explode for that to happen!" She screamed, but quickly calmed down as she cleared her throat. "Leaving aside the matter of my room...It really is weird for them not to contact us."

The other girls nodded along. Even after hearing out the events they had missed, no hints could be found to answer the questions of why the girls hadn't returned to the Kagerou Palace yet, and why none of them contacted Ron. This situation was riddled with mysteries.

"We're going to look for them." Ron said. "You all go on ahead. I'll finish another mission, and chase after you." Ron stood up, about to return to his room.

Although the situation was unfortunate, he had responsibilities as the strongest spy that this country had to offer.

"No..."

However, there was a girl that stopped him.

“...There may be a need to fight immediately. I want the Boss to be able to participate immediately if need be.”

It was Grete. With a calm voice, she argued. But, Ron shook his head.

“I would like to do so. But, the lives of the citizens depend on this mission, so I cannot postpone it.”

“...I will take over this mission, so you try to find Tia-san and the others, Boss.” Her voice was filled with pride and confidence.

She probably had gained more confidence after succeeding at her previous mission. But, leaving this mission to Grete alone was—

“I’ll stay behind as well. My injury has healed now, so you chase after the others.” Zibia stood up.

“I-I’ll support the two.” Sara joined in.

Seeing the moral support of her comrades, Grete showed a kind smile.

“Do not worry. Even if you are not present, Boss, we are the members who have bested [Shikabane]’s pupil...”

“...You’ve become stronger.”

A month ago, Ron would have been riddled with worry, leaving a mission to these inexperienced girls. That being said, now he can give a confident decision.

“—Marvelous. I will leave the mission to you.”

He could only admire them.

“Yes...Just as expected.” Grete smiled.

“Ah, um...so...” Lily was baffled at this sudden turn of events.

“Lily, you come with me.” Ron announced. “The two of us will follow our comrades.”

“! Yes!”

The girl deeply adored her comrades. She must be eager to chase after them. Then, taking her with him was the more efficient choice.

“This is an emergency mission. Let’s find our comrades, and come back alive.”

Together with these words, Ron and Lily departed from the Kagerou Palace.

1 Wild Tale

2 Sharp Sword

3 Older sister

4 Trance/Ecstasy

Chapter 2: Reunion

—Four day before Ron and Lily set out to search for the lost girls.

Tia was wearing a swimsuit, lying on a deck chair. Clad in the black swimsuit with much skin to show, she looked fairly comfortable nonetheless. The sun had started to set, as the violet light illuminated the outdoor pool. However, that light was fairly weak, and even with the light coming from the hotel next to the pool, it was fairly dark around her. On top of that, the pool had lights underwater, lighting up the surface in a red-purple light, which created an immoral feeling.

This place was located in the greatest pleasure and entertainment district of the Republic of Deen. The mountain nearby had a lot of gold to offer, which had a lot of workers gather here, as even a railroad system had been established. Once all the gold had been mined, there was the fear of this place turning into a ghost town, so they swiftly opened up touristic attractions, which led to this place turning into the most popular tourist spot in the entire country.

Though the law doesn't allow any casinos, there was no doubt that the rich of this place were betting money again tonight. As this town hadn't suffered much from the World War, it still shone strong. And now, Tia was stretching her body inside this high-class hotel.

We did successfully clear the mission, so a bit of luxury should be fine.

—The successful subjugation of the assassin [Shikabane].

Going along with Ron' orders, they headed to the city which supposedly harbored this assassin, and restrained him. After that, they exposed [Shikabane], caught him, and the other allies he had in town, which brought them to the present.

To be perfectly honest, Sensei did 90% of that, though...

The girl's jobs were fairly simple. All they had to do was make sure that the citizens were safe and far away from the battle, so that they wouldn't end up as possible victims of [Shikabane]'s violence. Though they contributed to finding the location of the assassin, Ron was the only one to head to the actual battle.

And, until the very end, we never cooperated...

Though they managed to successfully clear their respective jobs, it was a mess all over. Ron gave out detailed orders, and the others followed these. When Tia raised her upper body to not remember all the awful things that happened, another person appeared next to her.

"Hey, what is this place?"

It was Monika. She was wearing a swimsuit, but had a jacket above that. With an expression that didn't even try to hide her displeasure, she glared over at the pool.

"Why do they have heating outside? The pool at night? And what is this illicit light coming from the pool?"

"It's a top-class hotel. Is this your first time coming to a place like this?"

"Who would come here more than once, if not ever."

"Fufu, we successfully cleared the mission, so we have to give ourselves a reward, don't you think?"

"You're just way too kind to yourself."

She said with harsh words, but the pay of a spy is nothing to complain about, and it's each person's freedom on how to use it.

Really...Monika just loves to pick fights.

Tia gave Monika a judgemental gaze, but was ignored. Instead, she just sat down on another deck chair, and started reading. Romantic novels out of all the things. But, the amount of light apparently didn't suffice, as she narrowed her eyebrows.

"For crying out loud...If this wasn't Ron-san's orders, I would have been off and away already."

"I'm totally fine with this~"

Of course, Monika and Tia weren't nearly close enough to spend a joyful break. Instead, they had to stay in the same hotel for a reason.

"—Who else would be looking after these children then?" Tia gazed over at the pool.

"Take my special water pistol!"

"Wha!?"

Inside the pool were Annette, carrying a giant water pistol, as well as Elna, who was desperately trying to escape. On the outside, it might have looked like two cute girls enjoying the pool—but for the people who knew, it was a grotesque sight.

"Charging energy!" Annette turned the wheel attached to the pistol, which sucked up the water around her.

Together with a tremendously loud sound, and Annette's words 'Fire!', a great mass of water shot right into Elna's face.

"...Is she going to be okay? I'm worried she might drown."

"Why not help her then?"

"What do you think would happen if I did that?"

"Then that brat would probably focus you next."

"Exactly. That's why I'll pass."

"Same here."

Oddly enough, they arrived at a common ground. Though Tia felt bad for Elna, she decided to leave her in Annette's hands. Ron said that they all should stay in the same hotel. They had to look over Elna and Annette,

because they could cause trouble if left alone. In the corner of Tia's view was Elna, muttering 'What misfortune...' as she ate another shot of the water pistol.

"I'm sure you must have realized, but..." Monika spoke up. "That technology Annette is using, it's not on the level of our country, right?"

"Yes, that's what it seems to be."

"Just where did she come from..."

The girl with mysterious origin and no memory whatsoever...Oddly enough, Monika didn't seem like she wanted an answer, as she lowered her gaze on the book, and started reading.

"...Why don't you swim a bit? You can read a book whenever you feel like it."

"That phrase will make you the enemy of all book lovers in the world, you know? You're denying the joy of reading a book when you're travelling."

"Even though we have to go home during the night in three days...Hey, how about we hit the casinos once the two of them are asleep? The two of us would be unbeatable, don't you think?"

"I'm already invincible on my own though?" As always, Monika couldn't be more arrogant.

Even after they successfully cleared the mission, she showed no signs of being willing to open herself up.

"How cold! Just when I showed some affection towards you!"

"I don't like the sound of you trying to be compromising."

"! I thought so. It might be better for us to just settle this once and for all."

"Hey, Annette. This shitty bitch wants some load of your water pistol."

"Are you that much of a coward?!" Feeling danger, Tia raised her voice—"—!"

Suddenly, she heard the voice of a woman. Someone was screaming. Apparently, someone else was booking a room at this hotel.

"Gya?!" Annette let out a shriek.

When Tia raised her head, a single woman was clinging to Annette. With her clothes on, she jumped into the pool, embracing Annette face to face.

Tia moved immediately, as she rushed towards the poolside, giving the woman a sharp gaze from up above.

"Who are you...?"

She had a small stature, wide open eyes. She must have been in her middle thirties. She had parched, long hair, snow white skin that made it seem like she was rather sickly. Her dark-grey blouse was completely drenched from the water, revealing her skinny body.



“U-Um...” Without letting Annette go, the woman spoke up. “...I am this girl’s **mother**.”

Everybody who was present had their eyes open in shock at this sudden revelation. It was a reunion on the level of a miracle. Something that even Ron wouldn’t have been able to predict. And, at the same time, it was the beginning of the end. Without waiting for Ron’s arrival, the team started to break apart—

Intermission: Whereabouts (2)

Ron and Lily hopped on the steam train. They were aware of the tourist location the girls had headed to before their disappearance. It was the entertainment district in the south of the Republic of Deen. With many illegal casinos, gangs were not a rare existence. It was heavily suspicious, but as long as one didn’t get mixed up in this sort of business, you were mostly fine. Even a lot of foreigners came to visit this famous location after all.

As they stopped at one train station, Ron got off the train, and stopped at the nearby store to buy some cigarettes and newspaper. When he returned to his seat, Lily gave him a dubious gaze.

“Sensei, you smoke?”

“No, I just gave an inquiry to the higher-ups. This train station is a typical delivery place.”

When Ron opened the plastic, a written report was inside. He read through it, and handed it to Lily.

“You read it as well. It’s information about the place we’re heading off to.”

“Understood...Ehm, Sensei, this is the recipe for corn soup...?”

“It’s a ciphered text. Can’t help it, I’ll read it to you.” Ron deciphered the text that had been slapped into his face. “—Five days ago, a dispute between spies had begun. It seemed to be a battle between the Lairat Kingdom and Galgado Empire, and our own country did not interfere. The dispute seemed to have centered around a politician from the Lairat Kingdom, who had been here for a trip overseas.”

“So that politician came to take a look at the entertainment district?” Lily spoke up.

“The Empire must have aimed for that.” Ron continued. “—The local police had caught on to this dispute, and reported it to the army. In order to

capture the spies that had snuck into our country, the army had put a strict guard on the district. Though they have managed to discover the dead boy of the Lairat Kingdom's spy, the spy of the Empire is still to be found, and currently on the run." Ron finished reading, to what Lily's eyes opened wide.

"Basically, Tia-chan and the others ended up at that place during a critical situation.?"

"That's probably it. I was too careless." Ron sighed, and poured mineral water on the report.

The written words melted away, vanishing completely.

"The army purposefully delayed that report. They probably want the achievements."

That explains how Ron hadn't heard of this dispute. If he had known, he would have surely sent the girls to a different location. However, Lily had a more fundamental question.

"There is one thing I don't understand..."

"What is it?"

"Why are the Office of Foreign Affairs and the army on such bad terms? We're both working in the same country, right? The reason this virus weapon had been stolen is because the army worked on it secretly, right?"

Apparently, she hadn't been taught the elaborate explanation at her educational facility. Since they still had time until their arrival, Ron decided to explain.

"It came to be this way. Even before the World War, if one talked about the Intelligence Agency, it consisted of the Army Intelligence Bureau, and the Navy Intelligence Bureau. Before, the army was supposed to find information about spies residing in our own country, whereas the navy was tasked with gathering information about the other countries, but they both started to keep information to themselves, which made the Intelligence Agency rather useless."

"So it's basically the same as right now..."

"That's why, these two bureaus running over the globe were restructured, which resulted in the birth of the Office of Foreign Affairs."

"Ohhh!" Lily let out a voice of admiration. "That sounds pretty cool. Like we turned into a union!"

"Exactly. Apparently, they gathered the most talented people of these both bureaus."

"He he he."

"Basically, it's the elite of the elite. That's why the army hates us."

"Eh..." Lily's face froze up. "That's all?"

"That's all."

"T-This sounds like a child's quarrel..."

"But the scale is on an entirely different level. Compared to the hundreds of thousands soldiers the army has, the members of the Office are merely a

few thousand. The information coming from the army and navy is being analyzed by the Office behind closed doors. In general, an army man is being treated more like a handmaid."

Comparing even the smaller details, the Office has the upper hand in terms of salary. Unlike the army, which recruits basically everyone that is a grown adult, the Office scouts and tests the possible spies, which creates another wall.

"But, isn't that just unjustified resentment? Somehow, that makes me pretty angry!" Lily's body shook in rage.

As if she couldn't take it anymore, she raised a fist.

"We'll show our results! That we spies did great work by stealing back the biological weapon that had been leaked by the ouch ouch ouch!"

"Don't scream out sensitive information like that." Ron kicked at Lily's shank, forcefully shutting her up.

If information about that virus weapon were to be leaked, society would suffer great damage no doubt. The only ones knowing about this existence even were a mere portion of the army.

"You can hate the army, but don't belittle them too much."

"So it's fine to hate them...?"

"Human resources and organizational capability, that's what the army excels at."

Their true worth was in the amount of material resources. No matter how skilled the spies may be, they were always lacking in manpower.

"The only ones to pull off a lockdown on a city like that is the army. The spy that had been locked down there must be driven into a corner. So much that they might just run rampant

"Rampant?"

"It could happen that the spies and the army start killing with a hit or miss principle."

Lily's expression grew pale, and Ron nodded. That just showed how much the army was willing to win with numbers.

"We can only pray that they don't get wrapped up in this."

The train started moving, and accelerated. Ron confirmed the scenery outside the windows. After they departed, they soon saw the large ocean, and a group of hotels at the curve of the beach.

"Just...this really isn't the time to participate in some incident like this."

Things are different now that his comrades were wrapped up in this.

However, he still felt bitter. Because what he really should be looking into—is the mysterious organization called [Hebi], employed by the Empire. He wanted to start his investigation immediately, because this involved the entirety of the Republic of Deen as a whole. The mastermind who had instigated this trouble had to be found and subjugated right away.

Chapter 3: Parent and Child

Stepping out on the balcony, the hot air from the seat hit her body. The hem of her negligé softly shook. Tia took a sip of the ice tea she ordered from the room service. Instead of cooling down her body with this darjeeling tea, it was helping to calm her down instead.

The night scenery was in front of her eyes. The switching lights of the hotel promenade looked like one giant entity. This might just be the only place in the Republic of Deen where you would be able to enjoy such scenery.

Equally sitting on the balcony was Monika with a book light, busy reading. At her side, she had more than ten books ready. She probably planned on using this break to her fullest. Naturally, all of these were romantic novels. A young couple of man and woman encounter, and fall in love.

"This is just my curiosity. It's not like I'm interested in romance or something like that."

Before Tia could say anything, Monika gave in a warning.

"I didn't even say anything."

"Your eyes said enough."

"Well, I admit I was thinking that."

"Also." Monika still had her gaze glued to the book. "Don't come out on the balcony in that negligé."

"My, why is that so much of a problem? Nobody is looking."

"I'm right here."

"Fufu, I don't mind stripping fully, you know?"

"...I seriously hate your guts."

"I was just joking," Tia sat down on the chair next to Monika.

"So? Did you come here to talk about Matilda-san?"

"...Elna and Annette are already asleep, so I wanted to hear your honest opinion."

"Why not just ignore her. It's not like Annette remembers anything."

Monika gave her a reproachful gaze. "So why—Did you agree to that promise?"

Just as expected, Monika was against it after all. Against the promise Tia forged with Annette's mother—

Matilda; that was the name of the woman. She apparently was an engineer that had come here from the neighbouring Lairat Kingdom. According to her business card, she worked at a heavy machinery maker, a major

company even Tia had heard of before. Though they haven't been around for too long, their well-developed and secure machinery is being shipped to all over the world. With a high warranty, if there were to be a malfunction, an engineer would be dispatched to come fix it.

Matilda was one of these people. The water fountain of the hotel had stopped working, which is why she was here. She also mentioned that she often came here to the Republic of Deen.

"Four years ago, I came to the Republic with this child, but we got wrapped up in a railroad accident. I was brought to the hospital, but she was never found, ending up missing..."

Tia and the other three girls were hearing out Matilda at the table near the pool. Matilda even knew of the mole Annette had at the back of her neck, and she bore a close resemblance to Annette, so she must have been her mother.

"To think she was actually alive and well. Her actual name is—"

Matilda revealed the real name of Annette, a name Tia hadn't heard before. However, Annette just tilted her head in confusion.

"Who is that? I don't get it."

"Eh...?" Matilda's eyes opened wide.

"Annette," Tia spoke up. "Why don't you play some more with Elna?"

"Understood!" Annette wrapped her arms around Elna's neck. "Elna-chan, let's play some more with the water pistol!!" She smiled, and pulled Elna over to the pool.

As the exact opposite of that gleeful expression, Elna looked over at Tia with despair, her eyes saying 'Please no...Save Elna...', but Tia was forced to ignore her. Once the two were far enough away, Tia spoke up again.

"Um, to keep it simple, she has lost her memory." Mixing in a bit of deceit, she gave a brief explanation.

—Though the reason for this is unknown yet, Annette has lost her memories four years ago. With an unknown origin, she had been in guardianship of the country, given the name [Annette], and admitted to a school with all-dormitory. And now, she was on a break with Tia and the others as friends. That's the lie Tia made up.

"I'm sorry to say this, but Annette doesn't remember her own mother."

"No way..." Matilda covered her mouth with both her hands.

"At the same time, we cannot just hand Annette over with a 'Is that so'. I don't mean to be rude, but you have no concrete proof that you are her mother, and we would have to consult the school as well."

The realization seemed to have set in, as Matilda grew pale.

"...So basically, my daughter lost her memory because of the railroad incident, and has earned herself another life already."

She apparently was lost on how to phrase her words. Speaking in terms of the law, if there is a proven blood relationship between Matilda and Annette, the Republic of Deen would be forced to hand over Annette.

However, that is just if you take the law into consideration. What is most

important, and should be considered first and foremost, is the opinion of the person herself.

"...Just knowing that she is alive is a miracle to me." Matilda smiled. "I'm glad she's looking fine. That's what's most important." She looked over at Annette, who was playing inside the pool.

Oddly enough, she didn't even bother to look over at the blonde-haired girl, who had tears in her eyes. Luckily, Matilda showed no signs of using her right as a mother to take her mother with her. She was the exact opposite to the girl who often referred to herself as the 'Great me'.

"Had Annette always been wild and free like this?"

"Yes. She often snuck into my work, and fiddled with the machinery. I didn't even teach her anything, but she learned more and more. Back at the time, I felt troubled to a certain level, but now they are wonderful memories to me."

"I see. So that's how she acquired her talent..."

Tia felt consent. That would explain why her technical inventions had this foreign feeling to it.

"Tia." Monika spoke up. "We have to head back now. The pool is about to close."

That was a lie. They should have another two hours before that. But, the gaze coming from Monika probably meant that she wanted to wrap things up. Tia offered to exchange contact information with Matilda. At first, she hesitated, saying 'It's not the best hotel out there...', but eventually followed through. The hotel Tia and the others were staying at was quite a bit more expensive, which is probably why Matilda felt she was losing.

"Um!" Right when they were planning to part, Matilda grabbed Tia's hand.

"I know that I'm being selfish, but please! Would you mind if I could eat dinner with my daughter tomorrow evening?"

"Eh, tomorrow...?"

"I would like to spend at least a bit of time with my daughter which I haven't seen for four years. Is that too much to ask, I wonder...?" She tightly held onto Tia's hand.

She knew that she couldn't walk away from this. Is this a mother's love? Tia felt awfully conscious about the glare of Monika next to her, but...

"...Okay, I understand. I'll put in a reservation at the restaurant." She could only nod along.

"Thank you very much!" Matilda deeply lowered her head, shaking Tia's hand.

At the same time, Tia heard Monika clicking her tongue.

Remembering this, Tia sighed.

"How could I have said no there? I can't just destroy her hopes after being reunited with her daughter."

"Annette really didn't seem like she could be bothered at all though."

"Then, what else should I have said?"

After thinking for a bit, Monika opened her mouth.

“—That she has the wrong person, and that we’ll call the police if she keeps bugging us.”

“That would have been too cruel!”

“—This girl is my child, and not yours.”

“My, what a sudden development.”

“—It happens pretty often. Fans acting as a mother separated from her child, approaching our child actor.”

“Can you stop adding weird settings to Annette’s life?”

“Whatever would have been fine, you should have rejected that.” Monika shrugged her shoulders. “She definitely wants to take Annette with her. Are you not feeling anything about that?”

Tia turned around. On the bed, Annette was sleeping softly. Though she wasn’t sleeping while hanging down, her sleeping posture was still awful. Her legs reached over to the bed next to her, kicking Elna’s face.

“Are you planning on having her stop being a part of [Tomoshibi]?”

“.....”

She thought of that possibility. If Matilda really took Annette back home, she couldn’t stay as a spy in [Tomoshibi]. She then would be able to live a calm life with her mother in another country.

“Well, that choice is illogical, though.” Monika smiled comfortably. “The team needs Annette. Even I have a good evaluation of her, you know?”

Monika took out something from her pocket.

It was a long, dirty brown wallet.

“A perfect imitation.”

Shaking that wallet, three small balls fell down from the inside.

“She took one glance at my wallet, and made this. It looks just like a wallet you could buy everywhere. But, the trick is to shake it softly, which dispenses these rubber balls. It’s a throwing weapon that consists of metal coated with rubber. I can comfortably walk around with three of these balls.”

This must be the skill Annette had inherited from Matilda. No, even if she were to learn this technique, is creating such a copy really possible?

“She must have some insane cognitive ability.”

“And yet, she lost her memories, quite the irony. Then again, with just a glance, she understands the structure of an object, and creates something on the same level—That is some skill to have.”

Rarely enough, Tia agreed with Monika. Annette is an irreplaceable existence in [Tomoshibi]. They cannot afford to lose her.

“Also, what did Annette herself say?”

“Frankly, ‘I don’t care either way’.”

Tia gave the information to Annette as fair as possible. But, she wasn’t bothered at all. She showed no interest whatsoever in her mother.

According to her, Matilda was just a stranger.

"Then that's decided." Monika clapped her hands together. "Let's just forget about that promise. Before Annette changes her mind, we should just run away—"

"—I think that this isn't a bad opportunity for Annette."

"Huh?"

"I'll let the two meet tomorrow, and keep the promise."

Hearing this, Monika was at a loss. A mixture of anger and confusion was resting in her gaze.

"Why? I really doubt they'll get any closer."

"....."

"Or, are you actually planning on handing over Annette?"

"No," Tia denied that.

She knew that she was being unreasonable, and inefficient. However, pulling apart parent and child wasn't the correct choice either.

"It was empty."

"What are you on about?"

"When I took a peek at Annette's heart, that's what I felt. There's nothing. No motives to stay as a spy, nor to remain in [Tomoshibi]. She only distinguishes between wanting to do something or not."

This uncomfortable sensation was probably something only Tia could have felt.

—I want to grow.

All Tia found in Annette's heart was such an innocent desire.

"I don't like it. We're betting our lives every time we go out on a mission, you know? She has no memories, and no sense of obligation. All she does is act curiously, throwing herself into missions like that. I want Annette to... what do you call it, hold more fundamental values."

At the reunion of [Tomoshibi], or in front of [Homura]'s grave, she just said 'The great me wants to stay with everyone!'. What a vague answer that was.

"The two of us really can't agree on anything." Monika complained. "I don't care about the circumstances of our comrades. Let's just focus on the profit of the team."

Apparently, Monika prioritized the greater good, the organization, instead of personal circumstances and feelings. Naturally, that wasn't wrong by any means, and very much like Monika.

"Of course, I'm not asking you to help me. You just have to keep careful supervision."

"Supervision, huh..."

"If you don't like the sound of that, then let me rephrase it. If Annette were to find a reason to take being a spy more serious, would that not be a big plus for [Tomoshibi]?"

Annette doesn't have anything that could be used, which leaves her out of control.

"....." Monika stayed quiet.

Watching the night scenery from the balcony, she muttered.

"Well, just do what you want. If she stops acting so free and wild, then I won't complain."

"Perfect."

Though she still seemed hesitant, at least Tia received the permission. Following that, Monika raised two fingers.

"But, I have two conditions."

"Yes, what is it?"

"I'm going to join that dinner tomorrow. To make sure that you don't try anything weird and hand over Annette without me knowing."

"I don't mind. What else?"

"Strictly speaking, it's not a condition, but rather a request." Monika pointed at the girls inside the room with her thumb. "Make it so that they don't embarrass me."

"Gaaaah! Don't run away! I chose this for you!"

"I don't like childish clothes like that!"

"Can it. Nobody asked for your tastes!" Monika forcefully held back Annette from running away.

Inside the suite room, Monika was running rampant. She was desperately trying to have Annette put on some dresses from a fabrics store. No questioning it, they looked good in Annette. However, with the pastel color, and the frills all around, the person herself didn't like it at all. Oddly enough, she was resisting quite a bit.

"The great me is a grown lady, so she wants cooler clothes!" She stressed, but Monika showed no reaction.

She forcefully tore off Annette's pyjama top as she stood on the bed, trying to put the dress on her. Tia felt sympathy, so she spoke up.

"Um, Monika...Why not let her wear what clothes she wants to..."

"She'll end up looking like a freak, so no." Monika allowed no objection.

"She'll pull us down if she goes outside looking weird, right?"

"T-This is a problem of pride now...?"

"With her rebelling, we lost two minutes already. Just keep calm!" With a ghastly expression, Monika forcefully had Annette wear the dress.

Annette on her end flapped her legs up, saying 'This is tickling me'. Yet, you couldn't tell if she actually hated it or not. Besides these three, there was Elna, terrified of this battle. She wore a black dress, shaking, as she fled to the corner of the room to be as far away as possible from Monika.

"E-Elna will go prepare breakfast. There should be bread and jam left from yesterday..."

"Don't you dare move."

"Jam ended up on Elna's dress!"

"That's gotta be a new world record!" Monika clicked her tongue. "Tia, you go wash Elna's clothes. Do it within five minutes."

“...Yes yes.”

From start to finish, Monika had been like this. She would give her other comrades detailed and miniscule orders, and not with the nicest tone around.

—While we’re observing the other person, the same thing is being done to us, you know?

Or so she would say, forcing everyone to get up at 5am, picking out dresses that won’t ‘embarrass’ her, and drilled table manners into the two girls.

While Tia was busy wiping away the stain on Elna’s clothes, she let out a sigh.

“Now I can see how you wouldn’t fit into an educational facility.”

“Again, I was just holding back!”

Just on that one thing, she wouldn’t back down. In the end, the preparations took almost the entire day. When the taxi arrived in front of the hotel’s entrance, the sun had already started to set.

“Now, let’s go. And make sure you don’t get your clothes dirty on the way. Especially Elna.”

“...The setting sun is so bright.” Elna narrowed her eyes next to the taxi. “—Time to evade it!”

“Youuu! Why are you trying to jump into a puddle!” Monika grabbed Elna by the neck and threw her into the car.

With their preparations somewhat done, Tia and the others headed to the restaurant. The place they reserved was located at the seaside. One side was entirely made of glass, allowing a view on the sea and the setting sun. The white tablecloth inside was dazzling enough to blind one’s eyes. Matilda was already inside, waiting. She wore the same casual look as yesterday, and lowered her head with a ‘Ah, hello’, when she spotted Tia and the others.

Tia smiled, and headed inside the hall.

“Matilda-san, Annette, your table is over there.”

Tia had reserved two tables the day prior. Hearing this, Matilda gave a nervous reaction.

“Eh, you’re going to sit at a different table...?”

“Hm? I assumed it would be more efficient so that we aren’t in the way of your conversation.”

“T-That’s true. I’ll try my best.”

She clearly seemed stressed out. This dinner today was solely for the sake of Matilda and Annette. Sitting at the same table would just make things more chaotic. Shortly after, Tia, Monika, and Elna arrived at their own table.

“Great work. Although Annette has lost her memories, they’re an actual parent and child, right? We’ll see how she talks to Annette, and take notes from that.”

“Indeed. It would be great if they could hold a normal conversation.”

The girls' table was a bit further away from Annette and Matilda. After Monika's thorough efforts, Annette's hair had been styled more neatly, as her normally chaotic hair was now smoothly going down her back, making her look like a cute little girl. If anything, she was a beauty on top of that... As long as she kept quiet, not running rampant. Using this appearance, a bit of a praise would surely be a good conversation starter.

"....."
"....."

First, an awfully awkward silence reigned between the two. Matilda tightly gripped her hands, looking at Annette. Annette showed a shallow smile, spacing out.

"....."
"....."

Another long silence followed, when Matilda finally broke this atmosphere.

"Um...Annette? That is your name right now, is it?"

"Yes!"

"How are you feeling? Are you hurt or sick?"

"The great me is perfectly fine!"

"I'm glad to hear that. I've been worried this entire time, you know. I haven't seen you for the past four years."

"I'm the same!"

"Ah, you were worried about me? I'm hap—"

"The great me was also worried about my own physical condition!"

"....."
"....."
"....."
"....."

Monika tilted her head, whispering a quiet 'Eh, what was that?', Elna muttered 'They must be nervous, Elna totally understands that', and Tia commented 'But, they have to start talking soon, or all of this will be for nothing'. Eventually, appetizers and soup were brought to the table, but even that didn't change anything. Matilda just quietly started eating, not giving any impressions whatsoever. Annette fully ignored any manners taught to her by Monika, carrying the plate to drink the soup, but her mother still didn't say anything.

When the seafood arrived, Annette spoke up.

"I hate this fish."

"...Eh, why?"

"These eyeballs are so rebeliant."

"But, you ate them before, right? With lots of tomato sauce, we ate it tog—"

"The great me doesn't remember."

"Ah, yeah...But, you can just leave it if you don't like to eat it."

"I hate the look of it, but they're delicious, so I can eat them just fine."

"....."

""

""

""

"Their conversation really doesn't match at all," Elna sighed.

"Even I feel uncomfortable now," Monika showed a wry smile.

"L-Let's wait a bit longer. Eventually it will happen," Tia formed a fist to bear with the situation.

The dinner swiftly moved on to the main dish, as they received goatling stake. Taking a bit of that, Tia subconsciously muttered 'Delicious'. No matter the situation, you should be able to at least give an honest impression—

""

""

As expected, neither Matilda nor Annette said anything. Midway, Annette stood up from her seat, asking Elna 'Give me half of the meat, please', to which Elna complained with a 'What is this, a shake down?', but that's about it.

""

""

Around the time only the dessert was left, all that was left was a long silence.

"Why did her mother just give up entirely?" Monika complained, as she bit on some bread. "Isn't this a bit too cruel? She's saying that she wants to take back Annette...like this?"

Tia wanted to reflexively disagree, but Monika was speaking the truth. Assuming that Tia joined in, the conversation might just start blooming. However, what meaning was there if an outsider had to jump in to get the conversation going. Tia reserved the tables like this so that mother and child could have a normal conversation. Maybe that was just unwanted meddling after all.

"That's right. Once the dessert comes..."

We'll have to part again, is what Matilda was about to say. Elna's nose twitched.

"Elna?" Monika gave a nonchalant response.

"...Elna senses misfortune."

And, she apparently had already found the source of that, as she pointed at the entrance door.

"—We're surrounded."

Tia gave Monika quick eye contact. Using the leftover steak sauce, she drew a map on the plate, marking their escape route and formation. Monika raised one eyebrow in dissatisfaction. However, she threw something at Tia from below the table. A transmission device landed on her thighs. Picking this up with a handkerchief, Tia moved to the table next to them.

"Matilda-san, please come with us. We'll act as if we're visiting the toilet, and escape through the back entrance."

Hearing Tia's quiet voice, Matilda raised her head at once, as if she had realized something. She might have picked up on something as well. In the meantime, the interior of the restaurant started to get noisy, as they moved through it. At the back entrance stood a waiter, so Tia lied about being drunk, showing a bit of her sex appeal to gather his attention. Using this opening, she gave an eye signal to Matilda, letting her leave to the outside. Once she made it to the toilet herself, she escaped through the window.

<There's suspicious men at the front. Three of them>

Monika's voice came from the transmission device.

<They realized you weren't coming back, and started moving>

"Do you know who they are?"

<They don't seem to have a respectable profession at least. If you don't hurry up, they'll chase after you. 40 seconds left>

Tia confirmed her surroundings. They were at a restaurant at the seaside, too far away to use a taxi to get back to the hotel avenue. Even now that they made it outside, all they were facing was a big main road, and a cliff that acted as an unbreakable wall. There was no place to hide.

"Monika, can't you shake them off."

<It's not like I can't, but it'll definitely be a pain. I don't wanna go rampant right next to a restaurant>

If the enemy isn't trained too much, fighting them off would be doable. That being said, creating chaos and wrapping up innocent people should only be a last resort.

<For now, run along the cliff. Towards the sound of the bell>

"Bell?"

<Just do it>

When Tia ran around the back and cut in the back entrance, she ran into Matilda with a pale expression. Pulling her long, the two started running. *Should I try and negotiate? No, that would be too risky in a situation like this...*

They moved along this main road that wasn't frequented by any cars, running towards the light of the hotel avenue.

"You over there! Stop running!"

They heard the screams and footsteps of the adults behind them, emitting killing intent. They won't leave them be just like this, it seems. In short, running away was the safer option.

"Matilda-san, faster!"

"E-Even if you tell me that..."

Though her response was weak, she seemed to be a solid runner. She managed to keep up with Tia's trained speed. However, her physical condition seemed to be a problem, as she started gasping for air quickly.

The angered voices of the men slowly caught up to them.

"...!"

An impact hit Tia on the shoulder. A stone had been thrown at her. It hurt pretty badly, but not enough to make her feet stop.

“Capture that woman as well!”

Tia covered her shoulders, and continued running.

<Don’t worry. I had one person head over to your location>

Right at that moment, Tia heard a bell. A high sound filled the night.

Without hesitation, she headed towards that sound.

<It’s the best possible assassin, able to kill without using a weapon, and neither emitting killing intent. It’s almost foul play, right?>

Together with Monika’s explanation, Tia spotted the source of this sound.

Beneath the cliff stood a girl, possessing beautiful blonde hair, almost like a doll.

“What misfortune...” Ringing the bell in her hand, she muttered.

“Codename [Gujin] — It’s time to befriend and kill.”

Right after, Tia was left bewildered. She could definitely agree to Monika’s statement of ‘Foul play’. It was too irregular, too surreal. In a sense, it was an assassin even more dangerous than [Shikabane].

Elna looked up at the cliff. Right after, a gigantic stone with the size of a human head came soaring down.

The girls met up at a public park with a water fountain. Tia reported that one man who had been chasing them suffered an injury. But, not in a life-threatening state. And, that they jumped into a nearby taxi, and succeeded with their escape.

Monika reported as well, that the sound of the stone hitting the ground could even be heard in the restaurant, but that it didn’t cause a panic. At the same time, no more suspicious people were around the vicinity.

After they finished exchanging information, Tia directed her face towards Matilda, who had her face cast downward.

“Is someone targeting you?” She asked her directly.

Matilda averted her gaze. “That’s...”

“You can keep quiet, but I will never allow you to meet Annette ever again.”

It might sound harsh, but it was just as much of a logical conclusion. Tia could not hand over Annette to any danger. Hearing these words, Matilda bit her lip.

“They’re bill collectors.”

“What happened?”

“...It started the day before yesterday.” Matilda started talking in an apologetic fashion. “I finished my work, and went to take a breather at a park, when my toolbox got stolen from me. When I desperately searched for it, it was already sold off to a pawnshop...I panicked...Trying to get it back, I went to borrow money from the collateral, gambled, but failed...”

“Of course you’d fail. Talk to the police first and foremost.” Monika complained with a sigh.

This location was overgrown with casinos, but the ones at the top of the chain use every opening of the law to cheat and make profit, so there's no way you'd be able to make it big.

"You could have just given up on that toolbox and gone back home."

"But, that tool box contained something very important to me." Matilda formed fists in frustration.

"Tia, let's leave her alone already." Monika urged. "Do you really think Annette would be happy by meeting her mother like this? She can't even talk with her own daughter, and has a high amount of debt. Let's just get her to the embassy."

Tears started to build up in Matilda's eyes. She might just regret not being able to talk to her daughter. Tia couldn't help but feel bad.

"You're too loud. Also, Matilda-san is the victim of theft, you know?"

"Is that so." Monika shrugged, not having any ill-will.

"...That girl is an angel."

A forceful voice resounded. For a second, they couldn't tell that it came from Matilda. Unlike her usual, feeble voice, she possessed force and conviction.

"What are you on about?" Monika let out an arrogant snort.

Matilda's shoulders were shaking.

"Running away from the bill collectors, what greeted me at the end of my despair was that girl...She looked like an angel to me...I met the daughter I assumed to be dead. If this isn't a miracle, then I don't know what this is...I might have been nervous just now, but I still love my daughter unconditionally." She lowered her head almost down to her waist. "I want to live with my daughter again...So please, give me a chance..."

Tia swallowed her breath. She was showing a pathetic sight of herself towards two girls more than ten years younger than him.

"That doesn't explain why you can't go to the embassy or the police.."

Monika complained, but eventually fell silent, and relaxed her shoulders. "...Well, I get where you're coming from." Monika sent her gaze flying.

"Annette, why don't you decide? How do you feel about Matilda-san?"

The gazes of all people present gathered on Annette. She had stayed quiet for a while now.

"....."

A silence followed, which felt like an eternity. Finally, Annette opened her mouth.

"...The great me has seen it before."

"Annette?" Tia tilted her head in confusion.

"That tool box...cobalt blue, like the sky..."

Matilda covered her mouth with both her hands. At the same time, Annette gazed up into the sky she just mentioned. Her gaze didn't fixate anywhere, and she continued.

"...Long ago, someone bragged about it..."

"You...Your memories..."

"But, back then...big, heavy, solid, close, painful..."

That's where her words stopped. Annette dropped her shoulders, let out a long sigh, and showed a faint smile.

"...The great me really can't remember." That's the only explanation Annette gave.

Is she slowly starting to change...? Tia felt a premonition. Was something born inside the previously empty heart of hers? By meeting Matilda? For now, Tia decided to welcome this. She didn't want to waste this chance.

"Hey, Matilda-san." Tia put one hand on her chest. "Could you let me take back that tool box?"

Matilda returned a baffled expression.

At night, Tia put on her mission-wear clothes, and left the hotel behind her. Her black clothes immediately assimilated with the darkness of the night, hiding her body. Avoiding other people, she crept along the shadows, inside this town where the lights never vanish.

At the main street, a mid-night water fountain show or light show was to be expected, which is why a lot of tourists gathered. Seeing this, Tia couldn't help but feel a bit worried. In the relatively safe Republic Deen, with a solid public order, gangs and criminals were still lurking everywhere, especially in easy locations like this city.

A pain ran through her shoulder. It was the wound she had suffered before from the stone. Though she was lucky that it wasn't a gun. She went and questioned Matilda, but she couldn't find out what organization she was dealing with. If she were to engage in combat now, she might just suffer a fatal wound.

Tia was planning on facing them head-on. She wasn't waiting for the other girls to join her. And, the second she thought so, a familiar person appeared in front of her—Monika.

"What? Did you come here to stop me?"

"Are you being serious?" Monika said.

She was also clad in mission-wear.

"Why are you going this far? What worth is there in taking this risk?"

"I told you, right? I want to fill Annette's empty heart."

"...What if Annette stops working as a spy as a result?"

"Annette, you see..." Tia gave a faint smile. "She can go back to being a normal girl."

"....."

"Monika?"

The girl had one hand on her mouth, seemingly thinking about something. Looking closer at her hand, she held a small mirror, checking behind her.

"Too many soldiers." She muttered. "I've been wondering for a while now. There's way too many soldiers around, ever since this noon."

"What do you mean?"

"Something troublesome might be going on in this town. I don't wanna carelessly act now to be honest."

After the World War came to an end, the major work of the army revolved around security near the country borders, disaster prevention, military affairs training, and most importantly—Alertness towards possible terrorists or spies that can't be handled by the police. It truly felt a bit turbulent in this town, but...

"You're still gonna keep going?"

"Yes." Tia nodded.

"You really are a moron. Even though you got injured this noon." Monika apparently was pretty fed up.

The corners of her mouth softened, and pointed at Tia's shoulder.

"If things were different, we wouldn't have failed like that. I could have taken care of Matilda-san, and you could have given orders via the transmission device. Wouldn't that have worked out better?"

"But, this is something that I accepted. I cannot give you any role that would bring you in danger."

When she gave out the orders, Monika had a really displeased expression on her face. She knew she could have taken care of this all by herself.

"It's the same this time. I will take care of the problem I put upon myself by my own hands."

"...You really are a moron."

"Wha?" Tia tried to convey her determination, but was denied right away.

"Listen, you getting an injury falls under my responsibility."

"That's not true. If there are people who don't understand it, we just have to exp—"

"Your comrades might not see it that way. Your rash actions might inconvenience me."

"Ugh..." Tia had no words to throw back at Monika.

That possibility had never appeared inside her head.

"I-I'm sorry about that. But, leaving aside Matilda-san is..."

"That's why, I'll help you out." Monika tapped on Tia's arm, who was left baffled.

"You..."

"Will you get it already? I got my own pride to worry about. If some comrade close to me got hurt, it would hurt my selling price. But, I gotta chase after you, so it can't be helped." Monika let out a tired sigh. "Just this once, I'll follow along with your naivety."

Following that, two other girls appeared from the shadows.

"Elna will help as well."

"The great me is here to assist!"

Elna and Annette arrived. Both of them were clad in their mission wear, offering their assistance.

"....." Tia's lips were shaking.

Her body started to grow hot. She subconsciously sucked in more air, as her lungs filled up.

"What happened?" Monika raised one eyebrow.

"I'm finding trouble believing this. I thought you'd say 'Don't go running rampant now, you shitty bitch', and get angry at me."

"Just what kind of image do you have of me?"

"And...it's reassuring."

Finally, these four people were working together. Unable to hold back a smile at the thought of this, Tia ran her hand through her hair.

"Now, let's do this! The four of us will definitely—"

"Enough of that already." Monika immediately slammed down Tia's words.

"We're not the four who didn't get selected, Let's stop trying to get along, alright."

She referred to Lily, Grete, Zibia, and Sara as the ones 'not selected'. It was a rather arrogant view, very much like her.

"We'll just cooperate in our own way, so be proud of being selected."

Oddly enough, those disrespectful words were more reassuring than anything else.

The first ones to move were Tia and Elna. On the main street not too far away from the train station stood the pawnshop they were aiming for.

Barely in time before it closed, they snuck inside. Glass showcases were lined up next to each other, harboring gemstones or brand leather wares.

It's so dimly-lit in here...Almost as if they have no intentions of selling it.

Her intuition as a spy told Tia that something was off. Annette went here before as a preliminary inspection. Looking over at the bookshelf she

mentioned, there was a cobalt blue tool box, at a location that stood out even from the outside. Tia looked at the price, and swallowed her breath—

It was two times the amount of an average man's monthly wage.

Something is weird...No way any tool box would be sold with such a price...

It was an amount that made Tia sympathize with Matilda's idea of giving up on buying it, instead heading over to the casinos. And, she could see the ill-intent that set her up.

"Hey, there is something I'd like to sell, can I have some of your time?"

The shop owner was in the back of the store. It was a slim young man, wearing glasses. He might look like a reasonable person, but his eyes gave off the pressure of a predator.

"This tool box, could you buy this off me?" Tia showed him another tool box. It looked exactly the same as the one that had been stolen from Matilda.

"Let's see..." The young man ran his pen over a paper with a gloomy expression. "...This price, then."

It was awfully cheap.

"My." Tia opened her eyes wide—and acted like a naive rich lady. "This tool box...isn't it the same as the one inside the showcase? Why is mine 70% less of the price displayed for it?"

Tia held a copy of the toolbox that was stolen from Matilda. Annette managed to create this within barely one hour. Just by taking a glance at the tool box in the showcase, she remembered the entire structure, a truly respectable feat. The shop owner pushed up his glasses in surprise.

"T-The same...?" He apparently was confused at Annette's elaborate copy. Even the outside and inside made it a perfect replica. There has to be a good reason why he can't sell it for the same price. Tia raised a charming voice, and touched Elna's back.

"Listen, this was something important to this girl's father, you know?"

"Even if you say that..."

"Please? We need money right now..." Grabbing the hand of the pawnshop owner, Tia gazed up at him with pleading words.

His face went beet red, as he returned Tia's gaze. And for three seconds, they kept eye-contact. That was all Tia needed.

"...I'm sorry to trouble you like this." Tia let go of his hand, and showed an apologetic smile. "This is the location we're staying at. If you feel like it, contact me." She put the memo into the shop owner's hand, and left the store with Elna.

As a final act, she ran her fingers through Elna's hair. Her beautiful blonde hair reflected the street lights, looking like it was sparkling. At the very least, the shop owner won't forget about Elna anytime soon. Once they were far enough away from the pawn shop, Tia started speaking into her transmission device.

"This is [Yumegatari]. First phase clear. I managed to catch a glimpse of the pawnshop owner's desire. He's just a filthy lump of greed for money." Tia already knew what next move the man would take. "I'll walk [Gujin] to the fake address. It might take some time, but be on stand-by there."

Being on stand-by in a backstreet alley, Monika received another incoming transmission.

<This is [Gujin]. Phase 2 clear>

After Tia's notice, barely any time passed when Elna's report came in.

<Just as expected, the tool box got stolen>

Seems like things were moving along smoothly.

"That shows the connection of the pawnshop to the theft, huh."

The pawnshop owner must have seen this as an easy target, and contacted his allies in a rush of joy. He had them move to the location Tia told him about, and stole the tool box from the blonde-haired girl. This can't just be a simple coincidence.

"...But, wasn't that a bit too fast?"

<Elna was entranced by the water fountain show, and it was gone the second she realized it>

"So you didn't even plan for that to happen."

<Also, Elna feels as if she hasn't seen her wallet for a while—>

Monika stuffed the transmission device into her pocket. It felt like she heard another problem arise, but ignored that.

"Annette, what about the transmitter?"

"It's moving just fine, pretty close to us!" Annette held a detector, running. The transmitter was something she added in secret to the fake tool box.

Following her guidance, they ended up at a small building inside the space between two giant hotels. A suspicious-looking basement was half-underground, and fishy men in suits were showing vulgar smiles.

"Really feels like the hideout of some gang. How boring." Checking inside from the window, Monika shrugged. "Well, whatever. Let's just get this done."

Monika put on a face mask, broke the window of the basement, and entered inside. Almost at the same time, a woman's shriek rang out.

"Who are you?!"

"Just a tourist." Monika wasn't bothered too much, and just moved further inside.

Inside this basement room were around five people encamped. One woman, and four men. Several bags were on the tables around them, probably harboring stolen goods. In the back she could see safes. They didn't have a dial lock, but a cylinder lock. It was something even Monika could open in a moment's notice. And, next to these safes was the tool box Annette created.

"Haven't you been acting gaudy. Stealing important things from tourists, selling it at a pawnshop. What then? Put a ridiculously high price on it, and force people to take risks at the casino so you can collect debt from them? Pretty amazing. It's been a while since I met scum like you all." Monika touched the objects on the table. "You have so many collateral passports as well..." Fishing through the mountain of passports, she confirmed it. ".....

Yeah, I thought so."

Finding the object she was looking for, she gave a grin. At the same time, one of the men roared in anger.

"Don't just touch our stuff!"

He picked up a metal pipe close to him, aiming at Monika. With barely any moment to the side, she evaded that attack, and kicked the man away as he went for a second strike. With full momentum, he crashed into a safe.

Having hit his head, he lost consciousness right away.

Seeing this, the rest of the group picked up knives, surrounding Monika. However, Monika wasn't the one to act.

"I don't mind beating all of them to a pulp, but...I'll give you the spotlight for now." Monika spoke in boredom, and snapped her finger.

"It's my turn now?" Annette showed her face from the broken window.

Even in this surreal situation, she showed a usual, pure smile. As the men were lost on what was going on, Monika took out goggles from her breast pocket. They probably had no idea. The second they had stolen this ordinary tool box—an invention brought to reality by Annette—their defeat had been decided.

“Codename [Bouga] — Let’s make this a composing time.”
Following these words, tear gas came gushing out of the tool box.

They met up at a park with grass growing everywhere. When they delivered the toolbox to Matilda at noon, her eyes opened wide.

“...How did you manage to take this back? Who are you all?”

“I have relatives in the police force, so I asked them for help.” Tia gave a convenient lie.

In reality, Monika stole important documents from the men that had been incapacitated by the tear gas, and brought these back to the pawnshop. Monika would have wished to take back the passport of Matilda as well, but she couldn’t find it in the room. But, now was not the time to talk about that. Because Annette was barely able to hold back.

“More importantly!” Annette jumped up. “Tell me what’s inside here!”

“Eh, if it’s that, then...”

“The great me was so excited, I couldn’t sleep at all last night!” Annette pulled on Matilda’s clothes, forcing her to sit down on the grass. “I want to create a trap that only works with the person I want it to. A while ago, a trap I prepared for Aniki went off because of the clumsy Elna. What should I do about that?”

“...Hm? You love playing pranks? Um, then, why not use this paint?”

“What do you mean?”

“Paint that helped in developing newspapers. It’s paint that easily gets washed away with water, and you can identify which is real, and which is fake. And, you only tell your comrades about that?”

“Ohhh! I’m moved!”

Apparently, Matilda had materials that helped for her studies inside the tool box. Unable to understand them, the pawnshop owner apparently just left them in there. Now, the parent and child were happily talking about machinery and inventions. Looking at it from the sidelines, it was a mysterious sight, but the two themselves were having fun, so that’s all that matters.

“The great me really wants this tool box!”

“Y-You can’t. I need this for my work.”

Annette kept talking persuasively, whereas Matilda just gave vague answers. Unlike last night in the restaurant, they actually managed to hold a conversation.

“I’m sure they’ve been like this before the accident...”

“Yes.”

Tia and Elna nodded at the same time. Annette showed a beaming smile like a child who had just received a present. It was an expression you rarely see when she’s with [Tomoshibi]. This clearly had a better effect than any high-class dinner. While feeling satisfied, Tia felt a sharp pain in her chest.

If Annette really were to stay with Matilda-san...

Getting regrets now, how pathetic. She knew that. But, her heart kept being shaken.

“...Let Elna be honest.” She muttered next to Tia.

She was stuffing her cheeks with a big donut, narrowing her eyes.

“Elna hates her.”

“Eh?”

“Annette.”

“W-Why?”

Tia was utterly confused at this sudden confession.

“Isn’t that obvious? Annette always teases Elna!”

“Ahh, that makes sense.”

Now that she mentioned it, Elna was the one who always had to deal with Annette’s wild inventions. Even in the past few days, she was the target of Annette’s waterpistol experiments, or getting kicked in her sleep.

“...But, Elna would be sad if she suddenly left.” She muttered.

It almost sounded like a plea. Maybe she was thinking that Tia was actually trying to chase out Annette from the team.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Tia said, rubbing Elna’s head. “I don’t think of Matilda-san as a good mother. She’s not reliable in the slightest. If Annette were to consider living together with her mother, I will object, and convince her with everything I have.”

“Really?”

“But, if Annette really wished for it, then I can only accept it.”

What should be respected are the person’s individual feelings. All Tia did was try and gather information on how to control the girl’s heart. She has no intentions of pushing Annette onto Matilda.

—I want Annette to choose [Tomoshihi] after finding her resolve.

That’s all Tia was hoping for.

“I think you’re great for that, Tia-oneechan.”

“Thank you.”

Tia was satisfied to hear that a comrade of hers was agreeing. She tried to live the ideal of her admired spy after all. If it was her hero, she would have surely done the same—

Annette continued to riddle her mother with questions until evening came around.

Matilda was absolutely exhausted, about to lose consciousness, when Annette finally freed her with a “The great me has learned a lot!”. On wobbly feet, Matilda approached Tia.

“This is crazy...in just these few hours, she understood all the new inventions and machinery...” She let out a sigh.

Her expression gave off a sense of satisfaction. It seemed to have been a fulfilling time nonetheless. As for Tia, she promised to contact her again, and said her farewell. Before the next time they met, she had to contact Ron, and hear his decision. On the way home, Annette muttered a quiet ‘...

So this is a so-called Mother', her voice sounding interested. It seemed to have been a meaningful time for both parties.

Around the time they made it back to the hotel, Monika greeted them with a book in one hand.

"Yo, good work."

She herself stressed that she needed to move independently, and has been separated from Tia and the others the entire day, which had been granted by Tia. She should be allowed this much freedom, since their break was about to end—Tomorrow, to be exact. Once tomorrow evening came around, they would be on their way back to the Kagerou Palace. Thinking that, Tia felt a rush of sadness.

"You too, Monika. Matilda-san seemed really happy, and it's all thanks to you."

"I didn't do much. The one who did the most work was Annette."

"Fufu, as long as we work together, we're invincible."

"I'm totally fine on my own...Well, whatever. Arguing about this is too bothersome." Monika waved her hand in indifference.

It was the usual Monika, but Tia didn't mind it as much as before.

"Hey, Monika. Today is our last day of vacation, so why don't you spread your wings tonight? Come walk around the promenade with us."

From start to finish, Tia fought with Monika, but now she felt like she gained a special kind of bond with her. Having a bit of fun surely wouldn't hurt.

"I feel like things will get expensive if I'm with you." Monika spoke lightly.

"Well, once in a while wouldn't hurt, I guess."

"It's decided then. The four of us will head to the casino."

"I'm pretty sure we'll just get chased out with two brats."

"...Elna is interested in casinos." Elna raised her hand. "She'd love to go!" Monika threw a pillow at Elna, forcefully shutting her up. After that, she showed an invigorating smile.

"But, do it after you properly finished your work, alright?"

"Work?"

"Gotta report to Ron. About Matilda-san."

"That's right..."

How will Ron decide? It's been three months since they've started working together, but figuring out his thought process and possible decisions is still too difficult.

"I wonder what he will say...I'm starting to feel a bit scared. Maybe he'll be against letting Annette meet Matilda-san."

The suite they rested in had a direct line phone installed. Using the special number, and telling the contact the password, they would be able to contact Ron and the Kagerou Palace right away. Looking at the phone, Tia's expression grew clouded.

"No, I don't think you have to worry about that." Monika laughed.

"What do you mean?"

“The problem has changed already.”

Tia couldn't figure out what Monika was trying to say. Next to her, Elna looked suspicious, and Annette gave an innocent smile as always. All members looked at Monika, who announced.

“I always thought it was weird. She hesitated when she gave us her address. She was a victim of theft, but didn't go to the police. When I went to confirm it, it was just as I thought. I found the passport of Matilda-san, but the name on it was different. That explains why there's so many soldiers in town.”

From the sounds of it, Monika had found the passport of Matilda. And, she kept that a secret, looking into it today.

“What are you trying to say...?”

“Thanks to you all, I managed to figure it out.” Monika ignored Tia's confusion. “Matilda-san—Is a spy of the empire.” She declared.

Seeing Monika's confident expression, Tia understood everything: Why she had been so cooperative. She probably expected such a development, and used Tia and the others. In the end—Everything was just an act.

“I'll report this to Ron-san.” Monika approached the phone, turning the dial.

“We have to hand over Matilda-san to the army, right?” Monika flashed the smile of a cruel god of death.

Intermission: Whereabouts (3)

Around noon, the train arrived at its destination. The second Lily stepped out of the train station, a voice of admiration leaked from her mouth.

“Isn't this more developed than the capital?”

Multi-staged hotels surrounded the train station. With a brief gaze around, she could see gigantic lodging facilities, crossing the number of them all together. It felt like she ended up inside a citadel. Those that arrived here the first time, the scenery always overwhelmed them, and Lily wasn't any different.

She had been born in a rural area, and lived in the dorm of her educational facility. She still wasn't used to cities of such a scale. Though she had been walking around a city of the Empire, which was even further developed than this.



"The hotel is around here." Ron muttered. "But, more importantly—How many can you see?"

Countless people were walking inside the two-floor train station. Passing the ticket booth, several stores lined up, offering a map or drinks. At the entrance, several people from hotels waited to greet their guests. But, in the midst of this atmosphere, there were those that didn't fit into this atmosphere.

"...Twelve soldiers?"

They wore military uniforms, giving the people who passed by the ticket stands sharp gazes.

"No, I can see around seven other soldiers in the appearance of ordinary citizens. They're trying to hide themselves, but the pressure and personality are easy to distinguish, right?"

"That's the level of the military."

It was something that couldn't be helpful for a spy. This is the difference between those, who are scouted to be raised by the Office of Foreign Affairs, and those that are taken almost with guarantee just by being healthy and young.

"But, the strength of the army lies with their numbers. Their individual strength might be low, but they can control a single train station with 19 people."

This is strength no spy could compete with. Ron continued with a quiet voice.

"—How would you make it through this barricade? Assuming they already know your face."

"...Eh, a sudden exam question?" Lily put one hand on her mouth, thinking.

"First, I'll use my position to have the person in charge fall asleep..."

"Then you'll be killed like a balloon floating through space."

"I don't really get it, but did I fail?"

Looking at the soldiers, one of them to be a commander. Ron moved towards the hotel he had been told about. The army seemed to have rented a first-rate hotel room, using this as their headquarters. They headed into a back alley shortly, as Ron ordered Lily to cover her face with her hood.

"Eh, I can't even show my face?"

"If the people from the army find out about your bare face, it will always leak to an enemy country. Their organization of information is a mess. They already know how I look, but you have to hide it as long as possible."

"...Sensei, aren't you a bit on edge?"

"There's a man in the army that I'm bad at dealing with."

When Ron stood on the sixth floor, a soldier was in their way.

"I'm someone from the Office of Foreign Affairs." Ron announced, as the man, albeit unwillingly, opened a path.

The headquarters had a giant table in the middle, with seven men sitting around it. A giant map was on top of that table, as everyone present had

their arms crossed. Diverting their attention to Ron, who had entered without knocking, they all swallowed their breaths. The young man in the center stood up, and stormed towards Ron.

"Hey! Why are you here?! I don't remember asking for assistance from the Office!" It was a man with a commanding tone.

He wore the clothes of a soldier, possessing a bulky body stature, and shortly-cut blonde hair. He seemed to be only 24 years old, but any youth and naivety was lost on his face. This was the man Ron mentioned he had trouble dealing with— Captain Werther Bart.

"I have no obligation to tell you anything. We have the right to remain silent."

Ron sighed.

"Just tell me all the information the army has."

"Is this how you always ask people for favors?" Werther had a strained expression. "This is information that me and my subordinates have heroically gathered—"

"Enough with the tedious talk."

"Ugh...you bastard..."

"Don't come any closer. It's hot enough already."

Werther rushed towards Ron, trying to grab him by the collar. Ron looked like he couldn't even be bothered, just easily evading that. Lily apparently couldn't take it anymore, as she stepped between the two.

"Um...the two of you know each other?"

Werther only now caught on to Lily's presence, giving her a warm gaze.

"What, you got a subordinate with you? How rare."

While feeling slightly nervous, Lily lowered her head with a 'I'm [Hanazono] from the Office of Foreign Affairs'. With this, Werther relaxed himself, gave a gleeful smile, and introduced himself.

"My name is Werther Bart. I'm a captain at the Army Intelligence Bureau. Nice to meet you."

Werther exchanged a handshake with Lily, and glared over at Ron again.

"It seems like I have an odd connection with [Kakaribi]. We've met several times already."

"And it always became a bother," Ron added more fuel to the fire.

This Werther was actually an acquaintance back during Ron's time in [Homura]. Whenever he would receive information on a mission inside the country from the Army, this man had often been responsible. He apparently had a good sense for incidents. When they met for the first time, he had been merely climbing the stairs, but now he made it as a captain, while being at a relatively young age. Ron clearly approved of his talent, but maybe because of the respective groups they belong to, he can't get along with Werther.

"Your higher-ups were being negligent with your reports. Tell them to report it directly, will you."

"The army is a vertical community. As if they'd listen to someone below them."

Ron complained, but Werther just gave a grumble in response.

"On top of that, it doesn't feel great giving off information we've worked so hard for just for nothing."

"There's more important things than your pride."

"It depends on the orders, even if I want to or not. People don't move with logic. Also, did you guys ever share information with us?"

"The Office of Foreign Affairs is an organization that treats information secretly. We won't just broadly reveal everything." Ron glared back at Werther.

Lily started to panic a bit, but it always ended up on such a level. The Office of Foreign Affairs as the right to inspect the information held by the Army. With a revolving attitude, Werther brought over the documents. They spoke of the battle between the spies of the Lairat Kingdom and Galgado Empire, and documented the dead body of the Lairat Kingdom's spy. Following that, they even had a photocopy of the passport belonging to the woman assumed to be the Galgado Kingdom's spy.

"This woman is the spy currently hiding. Currently, we have the main road, the train station, and the port under observation, so that not even a single rat can escape us. The bank account had been frozen entirely. She will have to come out of hiding eventually."

"So exaggerated. If it was me, I'd be able to find her in a day."

"And how? The opponent is skilled enough to kill an enemy spy."

"Like scooping up the water plants floating on the lake shore—"

"I don't have time for your riddles. Leave this to us. The top brass has already—"

"I'm not talking in riddles though," Ron muttered, but was fully ignored by Werther.

"I'll be kind just this once," Werther spoke in a quiet voice, so that his comrades around couldn't hear it. "As you know, the Army really doesn't like you folks from the Office. The top brass is constantly trying to find some sort of scandal. More than ever as of late."

They must be worried about their look on the outside, after having lost that virus weapon. What a pitiful revenge.

"If you were to sneak around the place, and failed in catching the spy, allowing her to escape, the top brass will immediately request a disbandment of the Office of Foreign Affairs."

"....."

"Even I don't want the Office to get disbanded, okay."

Werther was someone who knew [Homura]. Those who know of their great efforts most of the time do not see the Office of Foreign Affairs as enemies.

"...Yeah, we'll head home. Thanks for the advice."

"Oh, what happened to you, so considerate."

"But, let me give you one warning. Put up the guard around the port."

Werther gave a confused expression. "What do you mean?"

"There's no guarantee that you're only dealing with one enemy spy. You're not caring about the fact that more spies might come in, right? If this continues for much longer, rescue might come from the empire."

"Reinforcements, huh." Werther nodded. "That makes sense. But, why the port?"

"I just felt like that would be the place?" Ron announced, leaving behind Werther who raised one eyebrow.

Around the time they left the hotel, Lily sighed in relief.

"I understand the reason why we're on such bad terms with the Army."

Sneaking into the shadows of the hotel, she took off her robe. Half of her expression was made up by exhausted, and the other of consent. She glared at the hotel she just left.

"All of the people in that room glared at us with ill-intent. We really are being hated."

"This hasn't started just now."

"It felt like Monika-chan glaring at me during a mission when I made a mistake."

That was probably more contempt than grudge.

"But, it didn't seem like Werther-san was a bad person."

"I don't want to admit it, but he's an excellent commander. The people at the train station all seemed pretty skilled as well." Ron nodded. "I don't want to admit it."

"You said it twice?"

"He sees me as a rival of sorts. So vexing."

"But, you don't have to be so cruel towards him. Is it because he belongs to the army?"

"Look how arrogant he's acting."

"....."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"No...it's nothing."

Ron felt like he heard a faint 'Aren't you the same, Sensei?', but he had no proof for that. There's many things Ron wanted to explain, but time was precious. He returned to the main topic. Because Werther led Ron to some unbelievable information.

"More importantly, about this spy the army is searching for—"

"Ah, yes. Did you find out anything?"

"The picture on the passport resembles Annette a whole lot. She might be related to this."

A monochrome picture had been added to the passport. The name and birthdate must be fake either way, but the picture on it must be the real deal. And, the person in this picture looked oddly familiar.

"Eh..." Lily swallowed her breath. "Wait a second! So that woman..."

Ron consented, and remembered the words Werther told him.

'We already received permission from the top brass—to shoot her and kill her at sight.'

If this disappearance of her team members was related to this woman, this was no laughing matter.

Chapter 4: Breakdown

Tia remembered. The girls' role during their battle with [Shikabane] was just to run away.

Spotting this living corpse, who was aiming for an important politician, they reported it back to Ron, and monitored him until he arrived. Shikabane couldn't be allowed to escape at any means, or he would go into hiding again, murdering innocent citizens. Although it wasn't necessarily a direct confrontation, it wasn't any less dangerous. At a summer retreat, luxurious residence, Tia spotted Shikabane with her binoculars.

...It's just like Sensei said, he really came here.

He must have been aiming for that politician who was staying here as vacation. Together with impatience, a feeling of delight built up inside Tia, the feeling of being useful—But, that moment was blown away immediately. —Shikabane turned around, leaving Tia's heart to beat faster than ever.

Impossible...Even though we're more than 200 meters away...

She was careless. Even Ron would pick up with a distance like this. But, she forgot about that fact. Shikabane came running towards her. Between him and Tia were several roadblocks like trees at the side of the road, or residences, but they won't even be able to give her any time. Shikabane just used these as a foothold to accelerate.

—He's fully intent on catching Tia, and having her spit out information.

Realizing this, Tia started to run away at full speed. In her head was information related to the handicraft of her allies: Easy to break walls, cliffs that could be helpful with Elna's skill, or the various traps Annette set up.

But, Shikabane blew past all of that without wasting any time, be it Elna's natural bad luck spots, or Annette's explosions.

"How weak."

In a moment's notice, he caught up to Tia, facing her. The man was skinny, like an actual corpse. Barely any flesh was on his face, as his eye sockets were easily visible. That unhealthy appearance of his felt like death itself, making Tia shake in her boots. Reflexively, she took a step back.

"So you're trying to escape even now." Shikabane gave a dry laugh. "How pathetic."

Tia bit her lip. It was just as Shikabane said. Because of the various residences' brick walls surrounding her, she had even less space to run away than before.

"Ahhh, how boring. There really is nobody who can match me. All of them are just small fries that I get to crush under my foot." He held a knife, approaching Tia.

This wasn't the time for Tia to use her special skill. Neither were Elna or Annette's skill of any help. She had her gun ready, but with her legs shaking, she couldn't even open the holster. The only entity that dared to face Shikabane—

"Woah, your face is disgusting."

With these arrogant words, Monika appeared at the rooftop of a residence. Without a moment's delay, she fired her gun. Shikabane jumped to the side, and turned towards Monika, but...

It ricocheted. The bullet Monika had fired jumped off from the brick wall, attacking Shikabane from the back. She had tried provoking him to rob his gaze, and followed up with a move like that.

"...Huh, you're not half bad."

The bullet grazed Shikabane's back. He apparently had sensed this attack. Tia watched this happen, absolutely lost.

"To think the enemy would praise me like this." Monika rubbed the back of her head, as she stood on top of the rooftop.

"I do admire your talent." A gun had appeared in Shikabane's hand. "But, you're too naive." A quick bullet was fired at Monika.

It roared at her with insane speed. Both the movement of the gun, and the aiming at Monika happened with no wasted movement whatsoever, showing the true skill of the assassin.

"!" Monika managed to barely avoid it, hiding her body behind the chimney.

"Sorry to tell you, but you are not strong enough to be an enemy of mine.

The only one who can defeat me is [Kakaribi]. He spoke with a husky voice.

"How sad. You see, I received a report from my pupil. Kakaribi isn't here, right? I heard that he's over at the residence of a certain politician called Uwe Appell. Really, I want him to come for me right away, how sad."

Shikabane shook his head to the side in disbelief.

He apparently believed this faked information. Monika showed her face from behind the chimney, flashing a provocative grin.

"Heh, seems like Grete did her work properly."

"What?"

"Look above, will ya." Monika stretched out her hand, pointing up at the sky. Shikabane followed that with his gaze—

"At your side."

With the speed of a wild beast, a black shadow attacked Shikabane, sending a kick right at his face. It was Ron. With speed almost transcending what the human eye could perceive, he sent the assassin flying, as Shikabane crashed into a nearby brick wall.

"Kakaribi!" Spitting up blood, he howled. "I've waited for so long! Finally, our rivalry will be legendary!" Before he fully fixed his posture, he pointed the muzzle of his gun at Ron, and showed an equally unreal skilful shot.

At a mere distance of two meters between them, the bullet was fired.

Clank, a metallic sound rang out. Ron held a knife in his hand, showing no signs of being injured.

"Ah...?" Unable to process what just happened, Shikabane was hit with another kick to the head.

Swiftly, he lost consciousness, just falling down sideways on the ground. Tia watched this, and remembered. Repelling a gunshot—Ron's teacher Guido did the same thing with his blade. Of course, that meant Ron was taught in this as well.

"You could have just done so from the start." Monika gave a complaint.

Ron waved his hand in rejection.

"—Marvelous. Well done on surviving."

"Are you sure about winning in an instant like that?" Monika pointed out.

"He called you a 'rival' and 'destined enemy' and whatever."

"He just decided on all of that without my consent." With a confused gaze, Ron looked down at Shikabane.

Annette and Elna showed up, having previously hidden in the shadows of another building. They both pushed a big suitcase. Ron accepted this, and stuffed Shikabane's body in there.

"...You're not going to kill him?" Tia asked.

The contents of the mission was to kill him, so why.

"Let me tell you." Ron pushed the suitcase close. "They give orders to kill individuals as dangerous as him, but the best possible scenario is to capture him alive. He must possess valuable information. That's why, we'll hand him over to a specialized team, and question him. With a bit of truth serum and torture, we can get all the information we want."

"Torture..."

"Remember this. The future that awaits a captured spy is more cruel than death." Ron's eyes were cold as ice.

It was the strictness and serious attitude of a spy he would show rarely. Tia felt shivers all over her body.

"There is no hope. Either your psyche wears off and your heart breaks, or you lose your life after the horrendous torture. Two-timing spies might be able to survive—" Ron's voice dropped low. "Traitors will be killed by their brethren."

That must have been a warning. So that the girls would be careful not to get 'caught' the next time they went to another country for a mission. But, to think that it would come back as a warning in a different kind of way is something that she would have never imagined.

"We have to hand over Matilda-san to the army, right?"

Hearing Monika's words, Ron's teaching flashed by inside Tia's head. The fate of a spy who had been captured. A hell worse than anything imaginable. Her body moved on its own. She stole the receiver from Monika, and erased the code she had started to type in.

"Are you even aware of what you are doing?!"

"That's what I'd love to ask. What's wrong with you?"

The two girls glared at each other. Elna and Annette still watched the two, but there was no time to pay consideration. Tia grabbed Monika by the collar.

"You plan on handing over Matilda-san?"

Monika's expression was calm.

"Of course? She is a spy that has snuck into this country, our enemy."

"She is Annette's mother!"

"What if that was just an excuse?"

As always, Monika's arguments were sound, leaving no room for rebuttal. Just as she said, spies would constantly evade this country, coming from the Galgado Empire. Even just recently, the cruel assassin [Shikabane] had been doing the same. Just like him, Matilda might become an existence threatening this country. They had the duty to prevent that from happening. However...

Tia turned around, seeing Annette's expression for herself. She herself seemed to be astonished as well, as her usual smile was nowhere to be found, her eyes wide open.

"Eventually, we would have had to tell Annette." As if she read Tia's thoughts, Monika smiled. "It's better to let her know now." She slipped out of Tia's grip, kicking away her legs.

Unable to keep her balance, Tia fell to the ground.

"Calm down, alright." Monika fixed her collar. "First, we report this to Ron-san. That's our duty as his subordinates, right? You can't blame me for that."

"But..."

It was just like they were pushing the problem away.

"If Sensei orders us to, we'll just hand Matilda-san over?"

"Yup. And we don't even have to do anything. We just gotta tell the army about her location."

"Her mother might be killed, you know? You're telling Annette to just accept that."

"Yeah, what about it?"

Tia felt a rush of anger run through her head, after seeing how relaxed and nonchalant Monika's attitude was. How can she be so irritating, non-caring towards her allies? As a human being, there has to be some major flaw within her. But, before they could continue their verbal bout, another voice joined.

"Surely...Surely!" It was Elna.

Her eyebrows were tilted, about to cry.

"If it's Sensei, he'll surely come up with a wonderful situation to dissolve the situation. He'll bring up an idea that will stop the two of you from fighting!"

"Well said, Elna." Monika clapped her hands. "That's right. A wonderful idea. It's Ron-san we're talking about after all. He'll lead us to the perfect ending that we can't even hope to come up with."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Unable to bear it any longer, Tia raised her voice. Elna's shoulders shook in a shock.

"You should know it as well, right? That we don't have any proof for that." Of course, it wasn't impossible. Ron would surely come up with a conclusion that could be accepted by everyone. What a happy future that would be. But—What if he can't? Tia still can't shake the cold gaze of Ron as he looked down at Shikabane. Naturally, she knew that Ron was doing his best for his comrades. However, as a spy, the correct choice would be to torture the captured enemy. Keep Matilda alive, or kill her—She had no idea what Ron would choose.

She had no way of knowing, which is why she couldn't rely on Ron.

"Then, what else? Should we act like we don't know?" Monika gave a mocking smile. "That ain't half bad either. At this rate, she might just get caught by the army anyway."

"!"

The city was riddled with soldiers everywhere. It was only a matter of time until she would be caught. And, the treatment of enemy spies shouldn't differ from the Office of Foreign Affairs to the Army. Matilda will be tortured, and killed.

"I'll go ahead and report it, before you get any fancy ideas." Monika said. "If you were to assist Matilda, that would be regarded as betrayal to your own country, and betrayal towards [Tomoshibi]."

"....."

"Well, you clearly aren't the one I have to worry about the most, I guess." Monika averted her gaze from Tia, directing it to another girl currently present. "Annette, you understand what I'm trying to say, right?"

Annette still stood here, an unreadable expression on her face.

"I..." Her lips moved. "I..."

She was trying to say something. But, she apparently failed to find the right words. Tia couldn't keep watching this. There's no way Annette would have the determination to throw away her mother.

"Stop it already." Tia stood in front of Annette. "I accept that you're right. But, this is going too far. Do you really expect her to say 'Yes, that's right'?"

"Then, in consideration of Annette, we'll postpone this for one day." Monika sighed in boredom, and prepared to head outside.

She must be running outside to gather information. Definitely not because she's kind enough to break up this tense atmosphere.

"But, tomorrow night I'll contact him. That is the time limit."

The original plan was to head home tomorrow night. There couldn't have been any better time limit.

"Tia, Annette, I hope that you two take the proper choice as the spies that you are."

Monika scratched the back of her head, and left the others behind with these final words.

"It would pain me If I had to dispose of you, even if you were traitors."

That was the very first time she directed bare killing intent at her allies.

After Monika left the room, Tia let out an exhausted sigh. Sitting down on a nearby chair, she grew lost in thought.

Why did things end up like this...

She didn't remember committing any mistake or crime. On the contrary, she tried her best. Wanting Annette to spend some time with her mother was both for their sakes, as well as a profit for [Tomoshibi]. She chose the best possible method to protect this country the person she adored had loved the most. Yet, she would be regarded as a traitor? What obsolescence.

Why is Monika always standing one step above me...

This feeling of anger might just be jealousy. It was pathetic, and yet she couldn't stop. Why did she have to be this skilled, while not even bothering to work with her team. Shaking off these idle thoughts, Tia muttered.

".....Annette." Her voice was riddled with exhaustion. "What Monika said is true. This is your problem. I think asking Sensei for advice is a good idea. But, in that case, you probably won't be able to meet Matilda-san ever again. What do you want to do?"

Annette herself had to be the one to decide on her own happiness. That hasn't changed, even now.

"I..." Annette opened her mouth.

She lost all her usual energy.

"...I want to meet Matilda-san one more time."

Hearing this response, Tia found more confidence in her own choices thus far. Annette wasn't as indifferent as before, just giving a nonchalant 'I don't know' or 'I don't care'.

—Something was growing inside her heart. Meeting Matilda was a blessing in disguise.

"I see. Then, let's go meet her tomorrow morning." Gently stroking Annette's hair, Tia showed a kind smile.

She finally started to calm down a bit. Following this, she turned towards Elna, who was shaking in the corner of the room, and lowered her head.

"I'm sorry for screaming just now."

"Tia-oneechan..."

However, there was another reason for her fear, it seemed. Almost as if she had guessed the future.

"What if Annette said she wanted to save her mother? What would you do...?"

Tia didn't open her mouth, and just let this question vanish in the following silence.

The residence Matilda stayed at really wasn't anything to praise. After looking into it, it was a place that didn't even check passports from people overseas, and didn't question their reason for staying. The hotel charges were paid ahead, so that they couldn't be bothered later. It was a facility that often inhabited people from the train station, so it would only be a matter of time until the army found her. Monika must have seen this address, and the actual locality, and figured out Matilda's secret.

Calling the hotel, Tia called Matilda to the beach for the next morning.

There was a beautiful promenade, plastered with stone. Dodging the jogging people, there was barely any traffic. Tia and Annette left earlier than they were supposed to, and observed the port with binoculars.

"The great me can see army men everywhere." Annette declared, with her usual pure smile.

One night of sleep apparently helped in giving her some energy.

"It seems as if the port is on lockdown as well..."

They were going oddly far just to capture one spy. Maybe Matilda was just that much of a dangerous individual? Or, the army was oddly motivated? As Tia kept thinking, the person in question arrived.

"Ah, Tia-san, good morning."

".....Hm?"

Matilda gave a deep bow, to which Annette showed a confused expression.

But, just when Tia grew suspicious, Annette put one hand on her stomach.

"I'm hungry. Can we go buy some bread later?"

That's what it was. And, Tia saw no reason to deny that desire. Annette walked a bit ahead along the beach, with Tia and Matilda a bit further back.

"Today is the day you return to your schools right, Tia-san?" Matilda asked her. "I leave my daughter with you. Once I finish my work, I'll try to come visit her." With a kind attitude, she lowered her head.

Now, what did she mean by finishing her work? Tia was a bit afraid, but running away was not an option. She formed a fist, and went ahead.

"Let me be frank with you. No, let's just drop the polite speech. I want to speak face-to-face with you." Tia looked over at Matilda. "My friends found your passport. The name Matilda is just a pseudonym, right."

"—Eh?"

"Tell me. Are you a spy from another country?"

Matilda's face grew pale. Tia must have been correct. And then, she frantically looked left and right.

"Don't worry. We didn't report you." Tia said, working hard to swallow the word 'yet' at the end. "I just want to hear your honest feelings."

Soldiers were gathered in masses at the train station, or along the beach, so this promenade at the shore was the perfect place to have a calm conversation, which is why Tia had chosen this place.

"Tell me, Matilda-san, just who are you."

"R-Right back at you, Tia-san..."

"Don't try to avert the subject. First, you answer my question."

".....It's just as you said." She sighed in resignation. "I am a spy from the Galgado Empire. I couldn't use my fake name in front of my daughter, so I gave my real name Matilda. The fact that we got separated four years ago is also true."

According to her, she had been an engineer for the Empire. However, after her husband had passed away, and she lost her daughter, she started working as a spy as a side job. She ended up in a position where she would be employed at the machinery makers of other companies, and provide spies currently infiltrating the country with funds and capital.

"Rather than moving alone, having my daughter with me would have been less suspicious. However, I didn't expect that we would get wrapped up in an accident like that..."

"That's why you always had Annette at your workplace."

"Yes. After that, I assumed that my daughter had passed away, and kept living on with no real meaning to follow. I kept working as a spy because I didn't have anything else to do." Matilda laughed as if to ridicule herself.

"Having my work tools stolen, I lost my calm, and was surrounded by the army."

Although Tia was on the other side of the spectrum, even she felt that this was just an unfortunate story.

"But, Tia-san, I don't want you to have the wrong idea."

"Eh, about what?"

"I did lie, but when I found my daughter again, I truly thought of that as a miracle. My feelings of wanting to take her back with me couldn't be more genuine."

"...Really? Aren't the daughter you love, and the Annette right here with us, a different person?" Tia asked, clearly instigating a reaction. "She lost her memories. It's been a long four years."

"No, that doesn't matter." Matilda smiled. "That girl hasn't changed. Her personality might be a bit different, but even without her memories, she still is my daughter." Matilda turned a gentle gaze towards Annette.

She might have heard Matilda's words, as her head twitched. To that, Matilda showed a snicker.

"I promise. Once I make it back to my country, I will retire from being a spy. I will live together with my daughter—so that we won't ever be separated."

Tia tried to organize her thoughts. It was something to be happy about, something to celebrate. Annette's mother is trying to take back her daughter she had lost, even disregarding the fact that she had lost her memories. But, something tightened up inside Tia's chest. Is it because Matilda is a spy of the enemy? There was one thing she needed to confirm first.

"Can you really make it back to your own country? In a situation like this, I mean."

"That's..." Matilda let out a long sigh, clearly lost on what to do. "What should I do about this?"

"You're a spy, aren't you..."

"I am just a courier, and an inexperienced spy who hasn't killed anybody... I've tried requesting help from back home, but nothing happened...I guess I was just thrown away." She muttered, distressed. "Actually, I cannot take my time for this. Tomorrow, I'll have to try and make a mad dash for home. At this rate, the army will find me either way." Matilda formed a fist with her hand. "But, if I can achieve a future where I can live together with that child once more, then I will try my best."

".....Is that so." Tia gave a nonchalant response.

Saying that she didn't have any appetite, Tia did not enter the bread store. She just sat down outside on a bench, sighing. All she did was watch a parent and child happily carry bread. At the same time, Tia realized that her knees were shaking. She was scared of the mistake that she might commit. *If only Matilda-san had been an evil spy...But, thinking that is just awful, isn't it...*

She was cornered. At this rate, Matilda would be tortured, and killed. Then, what if she tried to help Matilda?

Then I'll get killed by Monika...and regarded as a traitor.

—A team with constantly disagreeing members is the key.

That's what Ron told her. Or, was that what he had learned from [Kouro]?

That's not true...With different values or views, the team will break down.

Just what was that crimson-haired spy thinking, as she said that.

What am I supposed to do now, Kouro-san...

She once again thought about that woman she admired, who was the boss of Ron, and [Homura] as a whole—

That girl was the daughter of a newspaper company president. The company had existed since the Industrial Revolution, more than a hundred years now, and was one of the bigger businesses. In the Republic of Deen, it was the second-oldest business, and bought itself into fame with conservative and intelligent thinking.

After the war, a drastic reform was needed, changing to the left-wing. That is why she had been abducted, when she was merely eleven years old. The newspaper and radio together were an unbeatable combination in terms of media. By changing his views, the girl's father had earned trust inside the country, but gave spies outside the country enough reason to abduct his daughter.

And then, she tasted despair.

For more than two weeks, she had been captured, locked up, and held at ransom. She was treated like a cheap pet. Stripped of all she had, she laid on the cold floor, wearing nothing but a thin pair of underwear. The room was filled with an off-flavour. Mostly because of all the excrement filled in the buckets at the corner of the room.

At first, there were those lecherous men who glanced at the girl with indecent grins, but as of late, they didn't even bother to look at her, only

throwing bread and water at her once a day. Her body, who hadn't seen a bath in over two weeks, must have been quite the disgusting sight.

—I want to die.

As for the girl that had been raised with flowers and butterflies, it was agony almost unbearable. Outside the room, she heard words spoken in a foreign language, meaning that she probably had been taken to another country. No police or army would come to save her. She was lost in a place where nobody would even care about her.

—I'm done for.

At a time where even her tears had dried out, she felt the gaze from someone outside the room, following exchanging words. It sounded like a young boy and a woman, but it was hard to tell. Either way, the girl knew she was deemed to die, so why would she even bother. Right after, a thunderous roar rang out. It had enough volume to overrule the world's roots.

The girl was baffled. After a brief silence, the door opened, and a crimson-haired woman stood there. Her long hair softly shook, standing out even in the dark room the girl was in. Although she didn't know the woman's age, she was a beauty above beauties.

“.....”

The girl stopped looking at the woman, and instead gazed behind her. She spotted the dead bodies of around ten men, all died a gruesome death. The faces of the men that had abducted her were smashed in, to a point where their faces were unrecognizable almost. The head of the leader, or what the girl assumed the man to be, had a bar sticking out of his head.

‘You are...Hm?’ The crimson-haired girl spoke out to her.

Standing in the midst of this gruesome scene, there was not a single stain of blood on her. Neither did she show any signs of fear. The young girl nodded. ‘I see. My allies are currently barging into the enemy's hideouts. They'll soon find the mastermind behind your abduction.’

Silence.

‘You can't talk?’

Nod.

‘I see. Must be the shock, yeah.’

Nod.

‘Anything is fine. Just think of something you want to say inside your head.’

—Just what is this person talking about?

‘Just what is this person talking about—That's the face you're making, right?’

—Eh?

‘Luckily, I went through something similar like this before. An ally picked up a stray boy ages ago, who could neither read nor write. When I met him, we had to communicate with expressions.’

—Is that so.

‘Well, because I was spoiling him with that, he really sucks at talking now.’

She was a mysterious woman. In such a surreal situation, she showed no signs of being nervous.

‘.....’ The crimson-haired gave the girl a confused gaze. ‘We all have our special talent that helps at our work, but do you have anything like that?’

—So she can tell.

—If I lock eyes with someone else, I can read their heart.

‘Phew, not bad.’

—But, I don’t want to use it. It feels weird.

‘Then, why don’t you try reading my heart?’

—Are you sure?

‘Aren’t you interested? What the inside of my heart looks like.’

The crimson-haired woman crouched down in front of the girl, and met her gaze. The girl’s body should be dirty and disgusting, but the woman showed no signs of being bothered by it. After looking into the woman’s eyes, the girl was the one shocked.

—What a beautiful heart.

‘Really? Thank you.’

The girl saw a pure, and kind-hearted ambition.

—Who are you? Why did you come here?

The crimson-haired girl smiled.

‘I’m a spy. And to protect you, I’ll do whatever it takes.’

That was the first meeting Tia had with the woman who later named herself as [Kouro].

The girl had been moved to a safe space after that, spending around ten days with the woman. She apparently had several allies with her, but none of them showed themselves in front of the girl. The girl only heard verbal fights happening outside the room, making her assume that several people lived here, but none ever appeared. The only person she ever talked to was Kouro.

Whenever the girl felt bored, the woman would stop by, and tell her about spies. She even openly spoke about the secret agencies. About the [War Wages in Shadows], the organization called [Homura], the missions they had challenged, and how much the boy had grown in these three years ever since he was picked up by the group.

Equally, she answered lots of questions that came from Tia herself. Even without Tia having any need to talk, she could perfectly pick up what Tia wanted to hear.

—Why do you work as a spy?

The crimson-haired girl put one hand on her mouth, and thought about it for a bit.

‘To bring the war to the next step, I guess?’

—I don’t get it.

—Didn’t the war end already?

'No, it didn't end. Fighting and war have never disappeared from human history. Conflict is the essence of a human being. But, humans can change the way they fight war.'

—They can?

'The rules can be changed. A war has something like a game-related system to them. Humans continue to rewrite those rules as time moves on. The general idea of territory was born, with country borders. Sovereign nations were born, treaties were introduced, and international laws were brought into existence. Inside of this framework, humans continue to fight.'

—Sounds like some sport.

'Summarizing it simply like that is rude towards the victims of the war. But, that's exactly how it is. Exhausted by the war, humans decide on new rules. The World War ended, and a war fought by spies started. One day, this war will change appearance again. At the end of continued fighting and suffering, that is.'

The crimson-haired woman licked her lips.

'At the same time, once the war of spies ends, we go back to mindless slaughter and atrocities, though.'

—So another World War will begin then?

'It's my duty to stop that, yeah.'

—Amazing. So you'll save this world.

'Yup. I actually wanted to be a hero, and not a spy.'

—A hero?

'Spies can only save the citizens of their own country, but a hero can go even further beyond, right?'

Hearing these words, the young girl started whispering before she even realized it.

'I want to...become someone like you...?'

'My, your voice has returned I see.' The crimson-haired woman narrowed her eyes.

'Were you trying to copy my way of speaking?'

—I tried to take back my voice by using yours.

—Can I get even closer with you now...?

'.....'

The girl was worried for a moment if she had angered the woman. But, she just nodded, and gently rubbed the head of the girl.

'If it's you, then I'm sure you'll be able to overcome me.' Her mouth assembled words. 'Why don't I teach you a bit, then.'

Feeling the warmth coming from the woman's hand, the girl was already entranced.

Remembering the past, Tia found herself smiling.

Thinking back to it, she wasn't just kind, but also pretty strict...

Even after Tia had grown up like this, she still found trouble understanding a lot about the woman. Even though she talked a lot about fighting, about

her love for others, she continued to kill. At the root of her existence was the desire to save more and more people. How did she face this contradiction?

Whenever Tia thought of the woman, she was filled with a sense of longing. For her ideals, she had carried an immense responsibility, and walked the path she had to. With just kindness and idle talk, you won't be able to change the world. It is your own work.

"Tia-aniki."

Annette stood in front of Tia, interrupting her thoughts. From the looks of it, her conversation with Matilda had ended. In the distance, Tia saw Matilda waving her hand, signaling that parent and child time was over.

"This is a reward from the great me." Annette stuffed something into Tia's mouth.

It was chocolate danish. The bread store seemed to have take-out as well.

"It's my thanks. I bestow this favor upon you."

"Thanks...From the looks of it, things worked out?"

"It's thanks to you, Aniki!" Annette happily sat down next to Tia.

She observed the small of back of Matilda, walking into the distance.

"Hey, Annette."

"Hm?"

"You see, there was a time when I was separated from my parents as well.

Though it was only for four weeks."

Naturally, it wasn't as much of a tragedy as it was for Annette. Inside of [Tomoshibi], there are girls who are even more unfortunate than Tia herself. But, that fear and despair she felt won't vanish just because of that. Just like the image of the gallant hero in her heart won't vanish either.

"And what about that?"

"No, it's nothing."

It wasn't something Annette needed to hear. She would just end up pushing it onto her. This problem right now and Tia's past had no connection whatsoever.

"Then, let me hear your response." Tia grabbed Annette's hand. "What do you want to do? Do you want to save Matilda-san, or do you—"

A loud bellow came from the main street. A bit further down her field of view, she spotted ambulances and police officers running.

...An accident maybe?

Not like she had to worry about it too much. Accidents happen all the time.

"....."

Annette's eyes were wide open. Seeing the emotions Annette must be feeling right now, she swiftly responded.

"Don't worry, Annette." She held her hand even tighter. "This is the opposite direction from Matilda-san's hotel."

"....."

"You're worried, huh. I think that's a great thing."

Annette's silence spoke more than a thousand words. She probably couldn't disregard Matilda. Tia rubbed Annette's head.

"You just have to act accordingly to your emotions."

"Aniki..." For a second, her words stopped. "Why do you work so hard for my sake?"

Several answers flashed up in Tia's head. Even Monika was annoyed before. Because they're allies? Because she admires being a hero? Because that's what she was taught? No. Several reasons had appeared inside of Tia that she had trouble making out a concrete one.

"Looking at you, I just feel like I want to do it, that's all."

She can't avoid her gaze from her own feelings.

"Let me hear your selfishness. I'll accept all of it."

Annette took a deep breath.

"The great me wants to save Mother!"

Tia nodded her head.

"Okay. I'll do something about the rest."

Annette was given too big of a choice. Something a fourteen-years old girl should not be forced to carry. That's why, now it was Tia's job. She'll break through out of this deadlock. Just like her ideal hero, she would save her comrades.

At the bottom of the giant hotels stood several food and drink stores.

Passing the street, you see normal restaurants and stores, but the second more you step into the street, you find suspicious locations. From popular clubs to suspicious drug stores. The scent of scattered cigarettes stuck to the nose.

Once night came around, even more lights went up in the streets. Inside the stores came the sounds of women persuaded, and other people who desperately tried to make a winning at the casinos. In the midst of these, Tia felt an odd sense of sympathy with them. She slipped out of the hotel, and walked down the street with Monika.

Tonight, they weren't sleeping over at a first-class hotel, but rather at a weak lodging. One part of this was the idea to cover up their tracks, but they also didn't want to pay any more. Oddly enough, nobody thought of these two girls as suspicious,

"How far do you plan on taking me?" Monika glared over at Tia.

About ten minutes ago, she was fully overwhelmed, a rare sight for Monika. Inside the room of the hotel, Tia had a gun muzzle pointed at her head, asked 'You're going to betray [Tomoshibi]?' So that the sleeping Elna and Annette wouldn't be woken up in the chaos, Monika offered to change the location, which is why they were heading to a calm, deserted location. Finally, once they had arrived...beneath the dimly-lit surroundings, Tia opened her mouth.

"—Let's talk this out."

It was a narrow street of about two meters width, located between two buildings. Tia's high voice reverberated lively.

"...I'm disappointed." Monika lifted her hand towards the sky. "Well, I guess this is all you can do."

"You see, I don't think I'm in the wrong here." Facing Monika, Tia carefully chose her words. "We both have something we cannot back down from, and pull through with that. I want to save as many people as I can, even if I have to break the law. You don't allow any exceptions, moving with the values of the organization. Right? Our positions are just different. So let's respect each other."

"That's what you wanted to tell me? I really don't see any reason why I should care." Monika tilted her head in boredom. "Did you decide yet? Report Matilda-san, or betray the team, which is it?"

These were the two devilish choices, tearing apart Tia's body. Choosing the former, Annette's feelings, which she just finally managed to grow, would be cut down and cease to exist, and the latter would spell doom for Tia herself. Only one way to avoid these two existed...

"There's actually another option here."

"Huh?"

"It's simple. I will have you surrender. If I can make sure that you keep your mouth shut, we won't have to hand over Matilda-san, and my betrayal won't be made public either." With as much confidence as she could, Tia declared.

"We are both correct. That's why, there's only one path to take—That is, for us to fight it out."

This is the path Tia had decided on.

—Defeat Monika. With my own hands.

If she could do that, she might be able to have Monika keep quiet about this incident. With determination not to back down, she made it this far.

"50 pints." Monika's mouth loosened up a bit.

She looked like she was enjoying herself.

"This is great, Tia. My appreciation of you has just gone up." Monika took out rubber balls from her breast pocket.

She held these three between her right hand's fingers, whereas she held a dagger in her left.

"If you landed a surprise attack, that would have been plus five points. You really think you can win against me head-on?" Monika narrowed her eyes.

"Whose achievement was it that allowed you all to participate in this mission with Sensei? Who was it that faced [Shikabane] while you were quivering in fear? Who was it that figured out Matilda-san's true identity?"

"...I know how skilled you are. That's why, let's first talk—"

"You certainly aren't strong enough to ask for such a treatment, you shitty small fry."

"—!"

A cold shiver ran down Tia's back, as if she was facing Ron himself.

I really didn't want to make her an enemy.

The problem wasn't just her awful personality, and raw talent. Monika's special talent—was unknown. All the girls of [Tomoshibi] have one special skill, one talent they excel at. Be it poison, disguises, theft, it is a speciality not even a first-rate spy could hope to copy. Naturally, Monika should possess such as well.

But, to Tia's misfortune, Monika has never revealed nor even mentioned it. On top of that, Ron is not telling the other members either. That alone shows how much of a difference in strength Monika possesses, what kind of an irregularity she is.

"Then, I'll go right ahead then." Tia smiled, clicking her fingers.

The battle between allies started. The first move of Tia—was to take a step to the side, and hide behind a tall man.

"Sorry about this, Lady. Orders from the Queen."

"Huh?"

Two bulky men appeared in the back alley. They were at a position cornering Monika, showing her big bodies. At noon, Tia formed negotiations with these two, and had them help her out. Apparently, they seemed to be gang bodyguards in terms of occupation. They both held metal pipes, flashing vulgar grins.

"Now listen here you little shit..." Monika gave Tia a disgusted expression.

"The kind of battle I know doesn't involve calling two people to beat me to a pulp, alright?"

"You weren't going to hold back, right? You forced me to do this."

"You fucking bitch."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

In a battle, Tia can't hope to best Monika. That's why she had to use every other method at her disposal. She deerly caressed the back of one man, and whispered to him.

"Now, I'll give you two a reward if you fight properly. Chii-kun, I'll become your kindergarten teacher, and heal you by treating you like a baby. As for Yuu-kun, I'll step on you with my boots, after having worn them for three days. Don't forget. I am the only one who will grant your desires—which you have kept pent up inside of you all this time."

Both of the men's bodies shook as if they had been struck by lightning, as they readied their iron pipes.

"! Two perverts?!"

Ignoring Monika's scream, the two men leaped at her. It was a full swing of an iron pipe. A normal human being wouldn't get out of this with just a wound. Although she had raised a voice, Monika was fine, leaping at the man who had swung the pipe. Monika threw the balls she kept in her hand at the wall. They vanished in the darkness, only to suddenly shoot out of it again, bouncing off the walls to hit the men right in the back of the head. Hit by this attack from a dead angle, the men were baffled. Monika didn't miss this chance.

"There goes one."

She rammed the hilt of the dagger up into one of the men's chin. It was like a magical attack. Just as Monika had declared, one of the men was flung backwards, collapsed on the ground, and lost consciousness. From Monika's back, another man leaped at her. However, he was hit straight in the face by another ricocheting rubber ball, and lost his footing. Monika dodged the swing of the pipe, kicked the man in the stomach, and sent him flying as well.

Tia watched this scenery from a far distance, fully astonished.

What is with these balls...It's like they're being pulled towards the enemy...

It was the special creation of Annette; Rubber balls with iron inside of them. They bounced easily, leaving a severe impact if they hit.

How could you even hit that...!

It would have been more plausible if they landed a direct hit. However, Monika had them bounce off the walls more than once, hitting the men at a dead angle. Monika's special talent may have been unknown, but at least a portion of it became visible.

—She possesses calculative abilities and precise handiwork to completely find out the angle, reflexes, and timing.

"Just how much control of your brain do you have...!"

This was skill surpassing anything Tia could have imagined. However, the man that had been kicked wasn't quite done yet, lunging at Monika.

"This is for the sake of the Queen!"

"Don't force me into this disgusting roleplay."

But, the man's movement stopped abruptly, as if he ran into an invisible wall. He had a confused look on his face, unable to figure out what just happened. And Tia was just as much lost as he was. Inside this dark alley, something that looked like lines, reflecting the dim light around them, filled the place. Naturally, they were wires. They ran around the man's arms, restricting his movement.

These wires must have been spun by using the rubber balls, as they created a net. Like a butterfly caught in the net of a spider, the man could only struggle to break free.

"And that's all." Monika once again used the grip of the dagger to hit the man in the chin, leaving him unconscious.

Immediately, the giant man fell over.

"...Just to make sure, this is all you had planned?" Monika went around, picking up the rubber balls. "Then we're done here. Alright. Why not take out your gun and use that?"

"Now you've said it..."

No way she could fire her gun in this town, riddled with army men. And, this wasn't the only tactic she had planned. She turned her back to the enemy, running at full speed. As expected, Monika came chasing after her. She must be aware that Tia could have planned traps, but nonetheless aimed to crush Tia head-on. Her pride wouldn't allow anything else.

In terms of physical ability, Monika was winning easily. Right before she was about to be caught, Tia slammed the back of her knife into an open water pipe at the side of the street. With that vibration, the pipe blew open, fully hitting Monika with a gush of water.

“—!” Monika clicked her tongue.

She jumped back, and evaded the water.

“...That’s right. You had Elna under your control.”

“At least call it support, please.”

Elna had marked down all the unfortunate places in the town, and this water pipe about to break was one of them.

“And, Annette as well.” Tia pressed a switch inside her pocket.

Following that, below the bricks Monika ran across—which were actually camouflaged explosions, blew up. Fragments of the brick came flying at Monika like shotgun shots. Monika put on the hoodie of her clothes, and turned around to cover from the assault.

It was close. A bit more, and she might have been able to best Monika. But, it didn’t matter. Elna and Annette had offered Tia many other plots and tricks.

“In reality, it’s three versus one. You get a taste of their skill.”

While rubbing off the dirt from her clothes, Monika gave an annoyed ‘How bothersome’. She wasn’t feeling like a coward. Negotiating with lots of other people, creating more allies—that was the way Tia fought. She had fully prepared herself. Be it the bombs camouflaged as bricks, the water pipe about to break, the gas weapon inside the drums, the drainage with rats crawling inside of it—Possessing both the talents of Elna and Annette, she could keep fighting on and on in this location.

“Give up already. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hmmm? For now, why don’t you try fighting me for real?”

Monika’s expression was the same as before, showing no signs of planning to surrender. Even if she’s at an overwhelming disadvantage.

“...To be honest, I don’t understand why you have to resist like this.” Tia muttered, sounding pained.

She wasn’t waging or betting on anything, those were her honest feelings. She could not feel any aspiration to act as a spy from Monika. All she does is make fun of her comrades, twisting words.

“You look down on your allies, start fighting immediately, and keep repeating some ridiculous logic.” Tia glared at her. “—Why are you even in [Tomoshibi]?”

“What gives you the right to ask me that? You’re weaker than me.” Monika didn’t even bother to respond, just shaking her arm.

Something appeared from her armhole, gathered in her hand, and she threw it with fluent movement.

Again one of those...?

Is she planning to do something with the balls again?

I’ve seen that before...it won’t work on me again...

Tia readied her body, and touched the remote at her hand.

“Stop it. If you resist any further, I’ll set off the trap—”

“It’s useless, I’ve already seen through everything.”

Before Annette’s explosions went off, Monika showed evasive movement.

—Foreseeing. That’s the only thing this could have been.

Tia didn’t know why, but Monika’s attack pattern changed.

—I have to get away.

When Tia tried to turn around, an unfamiliar object came flying into her view.

A mirror?

A mirror had been stuck into the wall, reflecting the surroundings. That hadn’t been there a few minutes ago. Most likely, Monika threw it there.

I see. That’s how she found out where the traps were placed—

Her thoughts were forcefully disrupted. Her field of view suddenly turned pure white: Light. Or more precise, it was a flash of light reflected in the mirror.

She calculated the angle of the mirror...!

Her eyes were blinded, and her feet stopped running. The next attack landed right in her stomach.

“That’s it. Not good at all, huh.”

Monika’s fist stabbed right into Tia’s solar plexus. The remote in her hand dropped. All strength left her body, as she collapsed on the ground.

—Too strong.

Tia held her stomach, breathing heavily, but still was unable to bear with the pain.

“I really wanted you to use your gun.” Monika spoke with a bored expression. “This didn’t even count as training.”

“Training...?”

“I was irritated, you know. That I couldn’t win against Shikabane-san.”

Tia was baffled. In comparison to Tia who was just relieved that the mission was a success, Monika held frustration.

...We really are on an entirely different level.

She grit her teeth. Even after all these preparations, it wasn’t nearly enough. But, giving up was not an option either.

I have to run away...I misjudged her actual skill...I can’t win with a method like this...

Tia still crawled on the floor, swinging her knife wildly, aiming at Monika’s feet. Naturally, that was evaded right away, but that wasn’t the reason why she did it. Tia put all the strength she had into her legs, and stood up. Any distance from Monika was better than none. Right after however, her arm was grabbed, and she felt her bones breaking.

“You really think you could run away?”

There was no mercy. Pulled back with her arm, she was slammed against the wall. Her head was hit, as her consciousness was about to leave her

body. Unable to muster up any more strength, she collapsed on the ground yet again.

She saw no path that could lead to victory. Monika's strength clearly didn't fit into [Tomoshibi]. Though she might not be able to win against Grete in terms of ingenuity, her raw strength would surely make her end up on top. Comparing her to Zibia's raw battle power, she would probably win against even her by deceiving her. It's almost like she had no weakness whatsoever. —In the midst of the group of drop-outs, she was the outstanding ace. —The strongest girl in [Tomoshibi].

"...That's why I want you to approve of me...!" A voice leaked out of her mouth. "Because I'm the one who knows about your strength the most...!"

"What, trying to appeal to me now? That ain't gonna work."

Even desperate words didn't work. If she lost here, Annette's feelings would be stepped on, and her mother killed. But, she had no means of winning either.

"...You still plan on resisting? The winner's clear here, don't you think?"

Monika gave Tia a freezing cold gaze. "Or is it...that you don't get that if I don't murder you?" She emitted pure killing intent, making Tia's body shiver.

Her knees were shaking, and tears were about to fall from her eyes.

I have to get some distance...And set up a proper trap—

The second she thought so, a dreary voice came playing back in her head.

—So you're trying to escape now. How pathetic.

It was Shikabane's ridiculing laugh. That's right, in the face of a strong opponent, all she did was fall back in fear.

—You're too soft to yourself.

Monika told Tia these words some time ago. And, it was the indisputable truth. Tia's heart is way too fragile for all of this.

...And what should I do about that? I don't have any special weapon like Monika does.

She has no means of turning over this difference in strength. Look at each other for three seconds? Such a moment of peace would not be allowed in a battle.

—Continue to hone your skills, and you will become a spy stronger than anybody else.

Kouro's voice reverberated inside Tia's head.

"...!"

—Aim to become a hero.

She bit her lips. She felt like something inside of her was dwelling up.

—Your mental state can take some serious damage at times, I see.

What followed Kouro's words was Ron. As her heart was left broken, his advice gave a huge impression.

—Enjoy all confrontation.

That's right, he said that.

—Face your comrades head-on.

“—!” Her body was stimulated with energy.

Tia once again put strength into her legs, reaching out for Monika’s neck with both of her arms.

“Huh, you’re trying to strangle me now?”

Tia succeeded in leaving Monika with a bit of surprise. But, she remained calm nonetheless.

“A contest of strength? You’ll lose.” Monika caught Tia’s arms.

With their arms connected, it became a battle of pushing the other back and forth. But, as expected, Tia’s strength was not nearly enough to shake Monika. She couldn’t even reach up to her neck.

“Will you give it up already? Fucking bitch.”

“...A hero doesn’t give up.”

As her arms started to shake, Tia gave a quiet snicker. She had already found out the method to win this bout. To go beyond Monika’s expectations. And, to clash with her. The methods to make this a success are inside of her. She continued to hone them, thanks to Kouro’s guidance.

“You better regret that you made a bitch your enemy.”

Face them, clashing into them, Tia focussed her gaze on something that was beyond her arms.

“Codename [Yumegatari] — It is time to draw sympathy and wreck it all.”

Tia relaxed her arms, opened them wide, and pushed her head towards Monika’s face. No, she wasn’t going for a headbut. As if to clash nose and nose together—Tia pressed her lips on Monika’s.

“—!” Monika’s eyes opened wide.

It wasn’t a romantic kiss a couple of lovers would share. If someone were to suddenly steal your lips, especially during such an odd situation, everybody would be shocked. Their noses were forcefully pushing against the other, slightly hurting.

—This is a reliable way to look each other in the eyes!

Even Monika was baffled, not knowing how to react. Her body froze up. A few moments later, Monika recovered, grabbing Tia’s face, and forcefully pushing her away. Tia’s body was flung into a nearby wall.

“I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you.” Wiping her lips, Monika kept rambling. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

She took out her gun which she hadn’t touched this entire battle, and aimed the muzzle directly at Tia, who had her back to the wall, crouching down on the floor. She couldn’t move anymore. All strength in her body had been used up by that one move, so if Monika were to shoot her for real, Tia wouldn’t be able to react. She would die, and be treated as a traitor.



But, she wasn't afraid. Because victory had already been decided.

"Hey..."

Tia opened her mouth.

"...Are you in love?"

Monika's body froze up fully. As if time had stopped, she didn't move an inch.

".....Hey." A feeble voice came out of her mouth. "Did you just—"

That confusion and flustered reaction had Tia let out a giggle. She finally made it, to the girl's heart: And found what she had been trying so hard to hide.

"For crying out loud, there were so many hints. Romance novels? No, not that." Remembering Monika's act, Tia shook her head. "You were hiding it very thoroughly. You kept this love of yours a secret, so that nobody would find out. Why? That's obvious. Because the person you have these feelings for is awfully close-by."

Tia succeeded in keeping eye contact with Monika for three seconds. There, she saw an emotion she would have never expected from Monika, a secret hope. At the same time, Monika's face was riddled with the color of despair.

"You finally showed me a human emotion. I personally prefer that expression of yours much more."

Monika glared at Tia, yet waiting for her following words all the same.

"You are in love with someone from [Tomoshibi], right?"

Monika faintly muttered.

"I'll kill you..." It sounded like a curse.

But, Tia was afraid no longer.

"You can't. Because that would make the person sad, right?"

Monika's words were nothing more but a strategy. She actually had no desire to kill Tia whatsoever. There was no need to win Monika over in the first place.

"The motive behind wanting to eliminate Matilda-san—was to protect [Tomoshibi], the place where your loved one belongs to. Ignoring that would mean that [Tomoshibi] has supported a spy of the Empire."

That's why Monika was so obsessed with handing over Matilda. Tia thought Monika was merely giving an objective view. But, that wasn't it. She always prioritized a single member of the team. To maintain the current [Tomoshibi], she gave a logical conclusion.

"What a wholehearted love," Tia nodded.

Immediately after Tia spoke those words, Monika leaped at her. She was grabbed by the neck, her voice forcefully sealed off. With even stronger force than before, Monika squeezed down on Tia's throat.

"Do not..." Her voice was sharp as a blade. "Raid my heart even more than that."

"...Yes, I won't." Tia agreed, when the force around her neck softened.

The girl was hiding her love, and Tia wanted to respect that.

"That's why, work together with me." Tia spoke up.

"...!"

"I respect your feelings. That's why I want you to consider mine." She continued. "What kind of choice does your loved one wish for, I wonder? Would they really agree if you were to just throw away Matilda-san?"

"....." Monika kept silent.

She removed her hand from Tia's neck, and stood still in silence. If she were to decline even now, Tia would be forced to threaten her. Or, she would get killed by the enraged Monika. In that case, she would be plagued with the guilt of killing a team member, and her love would not be granted. Their positions were equal now. By clashing into each other, they arrived at a relationship such as this.

".....Shit."

A long silence ensued, only to end up in cursing words from Monika.

"...First condition." Monika sighed deeply, and raised one finger. "Don't tell anybody about my secret."

"Of course. I won't bring it up ever again, and neither will I tell anybody."

She would have loved to hear more about it, but this wasn't the moment to be egoistical. Hearing this, Monika raised a second finger.

"Second Condition. In the event that your actions are exposed to the army, I will hand Matilda over without hesitation. And, I won't back down on this either. This is to protect [Tomoshibi]."

"Very well, please do."

If anything, Tia appreciated the fact that Monika was watching over them.

"Third condition." Monika raised a third finger.

"That's a lot of conditions."

"...Well, you know."

"Hm?"

"Um...you get it, right? Please tell me you do."

Suddenly, Monika had trouble expressing herself.

"Eh, I don't? What? Please be more clear, will you."

Oddly enough, Monika's cheeks were reddening up, and she opened her mouth.

"...That you don't tell anybody about our kiss."

Tia held back the urge to burst out laughing. What a rare voice to hear from Monika.

"...I'll take it into consideration."

"Want us to keep fighting instead?"

"I was joking. Anymore than this, and I'll get killed for sure."

"If you protect these three conditions..." Monika sighed. "Then I will surrender." She raised both her hands. "—Marvelous, isn't it."

For some reason, she copied Ron's tone and words. Tia sighed in relief, and looked up at the night sky. She was tired.

In the end, she didn't win against Monika. With all these preparations, estimations, in a situation where she had the upper hand, the best she

managed was to arrive at these negotiations. On top of that, it didn't seem like Monika was going all out either. But, nonetheless, she felt satisfied. Because she managed to score one win against Monika.

On their way back to the hotel, Tia walked next to Monika. During that time, Monika spoke up.

"To be honest, my role in all of this is just messed up."

Tia didn't understand what she was talking about.

"Ron-san said it before...that a team that doesn't fit together fully is the key. I totally get that. We from [Tomoshihi] equally lack an important amount of cruelty."

"...That might be true."

"We're too naive. Even now, I should have taken the role of stopping you. Throwing away my personal feelings."

"....."

"Even if I had to break your legs."

"Maybe choose a more kind method?"

"You'll definitely hit a roadblock." Monika muttered. "Especially when the enemy sees this naivety and kindness of yours."

Monika spoke with a reason, and Tia had to honestly accept this analysis. She wasn't saying this because of a grudge, but merely mentioned the team's weak points. Tia herself knew that her common sense was off from what a spy should possess. She doesn't seem like the type of person who can kill a comrade if need be. And that is a fatal flaw.

With Ron not being present, somebody has to take up this rule of being the cruel one. That being said, there was only one thing Tia could say.

"I don't think that kind of role fits you, Monika."

"Huh?" Monika showed a reaction filled with anger. "Why?"

"I can say that with confidence, after having seen what's inside of your heart. You can't throw away your emotions."

She would not be able to take the role of the cruel one. Because she would hold onto her feelings until the bitter end.

—She's hiding that wholehearted love of hers.

With that inside of her, there's no way she would be able to disregard other people's feelings.

"When we went to the restaurant together, you worked really hard to dress up, Annette, didn't you. You say all that, but you can't throw away your emotions after all."

Monika started walking a bit faster.

"That's the problem..."

She probably was aware that she wouldn't be able to take the bad guy role. By the time they returned to the hotel, Annette and Elna had woken up. They took notice of Tia and Monika entering the room, and woken up in the process. They must have been worried, as they weren't fighting like they usually would, just sitting on the bed.

"Onee-chan," Elna gazed over at Tia. "Did everything work out?"
Next to her was Annette, watching the two in tension and anxiety. Tia showed the most calm smile she could create.

"Don't worry. Monika will be helping us to save Matilda-san."

"Monika-aneki!" She raised a voice of joy, and jumped at Monika.

Naturally, Monika swiftly evaded that.

"Don't just jump at me, so annoying."

"Don't be so embarrassed now! The great me wants to give you a kiss!"

"Don't give me another trauma, alright!" Monika frantically evaded the approaching lips of Annette.

Things quickly turn chaotic with the two, but they don't seem to be on bad terms. From now on, they would work together to save Matilda. But, at the same time, there was no reason for Elna to participate in this mission any longer. When Tia told her about that—

"Elna has a condition of her own." She said.

"...Does adding conditions to everything as of late correlate to some trend?"
Monika did the exact same thing a few minutes ago. Elna aimed her index finger at the girl.

"Annette, Elna wants you to stop bullying her."

Of course, she pointed at Annette, who was still trying to give a smooch to Monika.

"If Annette stops bullying Elna, a-and just becomes a normal...f-friend, then she wouldn't mind helping." She spoke with quite the fast tone.

"....." Annette was spacing out for a second, clearly confused, as she tilted her head. "The great me always thought of Elna-chan as a friend though?"

"...!" Elna blushed.

From the looks of it, Elna was going to participate as well.

5am in the morning, the four girls showed up at the hotel Matilda was staying at. Luckily, she hadn't been captured yet. This being a cheap hotel, you couldn't exactly talk in private, which is why they took her to an empty beach nearby. Matilda herself was a bit suspicious as to why the girls still stayed in town even though their departure should have happened already.

"Mother, please retire from being a spy!"

The first one to cut into the main subject was Annette. In response, Matilda froze up, a confused 'Eh...' leaking from her mouth.

"It's just as Annette said. I want you to promise us this." Tia followed up. She didn't hesitate any longer.

"You might have already guessed it, but we are spies from the Republic."

"...So you were fellow traders."

"Indeed. That's why we can't save a spy of the enemy, even if you are the mother of one of our members. You have to retire. If you promise that, we will assist your escape."

Matilda opened her mouth, and let out a breath of relief, seeming happy. But, catching on to Tia's stern expression, she cast her head downward.

"But, how...? Possibly, by using some connections..."

"No. With brute force."

How convenient it would have been if they had some connection like that. All they could rely on was the strength of the four that were present. Not even Ron would come to their aid now.

"We will break through the siege of the Army—That's all there is to it."

As Matilda was left baffled, Tia and the others gave her a plan of operations, and split up. After walking for a while, Monika spoke up.

"So? We're not going to report this to Ron-san?"

"Of course." Tia smiled. "He'd definitely disagree with this."

Monika shrugged her shoulders.

"Then he must be worried. The plan was for us to be back in the morning."

Tia nodded. She thought of giving Ron a false report, but eventually decided against it. Knowing him, he probably would be able to see right through that lie. In order to guarantee Matilda's safety, getting in contact with him was a no-go.

"We can't help it. Because we've—disappeared."

"Well, doesn't sound too bad."

"We're the lost four."

"Like lost children!"

Following Tia's words, Monika nodded, Elna smiled, and Annette hummed. Thus, they disappeared—And their secret mission started, hidden by their teacher. Finally, the sun started to rise, shining over this following incident.

A long day was about to start in the pleasure district. At 5am, the girls and Matilda decided for their plan. Unbeknownst to them—at 12am, Ron and Lily arrived at the train station. And, after them, at 4pm—

Just as Ron had warned Werther...The wicked one arrived at the port.

Intermission: Whereabouts (4)

At the passing of 3pm, when the sun had started to set, Ron finally managed to grab the foothold of the girls. It was a community building in the corner of the town, with one floor underground, and three floors tall. The first floor inhabited a proxy purchasing store for horse racing, the second floor offered a money lender, and the third floor had a suspicious printing company's billboard.

It was a building that didn't exactly give off a sense of safety. Though the floor underground had no billboards to show off, there was no doubt some shady business went down.

As of right now, the building was locked off, guarded by army soldiers. Ron even spotted Werther in the distance. He walked past the tape, and entered inside.

"Seems like there was a murder here." Ron called out to Werther with these words, earning himself a glare.

"Hey, shouldn't you have gone home, you bastard?"

"You believed that lie?" Ron confirmed the traces of blood left behind in the room.

It had splattered everywhere, creating quite the grotesque scenery.

"Five people seem to have been killed. The police reports said that it was a dispute between gangs, but now that you appeared, it must have been spies, right?"

"I thought I ordered the police to treat this as top secret though?"

"Don't talk back where it's not even needed." Werther clicked his tongue.

"The murder weapon was piano wire. It was a booby trap with some insane talent. All five of them were cut to pieces. The corpses were not a thing you could look at for too long. Apparently, not many of them looked like a body after that."

"I can tell by just looking at the scene here. Quite the cruel handiwork, I have to say."

The bodies had already been cleaned up, but the blood that reached up on the ceiling told enough of a story.

"—It's the same method of killing the spy currently on the run has used." Werther announced.

The spy that had killed the enemy from the Lairat Kingdom, and who is currently on the run—When Ron was giving a bit of a thought towards her identity, the tip of his nose twitched.

"...Weird." He muttered. "The scent of tear gas still lingers here. But, the day it was sprayed around, and the day the crime happened show an irregularity."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The gas was sprayed here the day before the murder occurred."

Apparently, this office had suffered from two consecutive incidents. Three days ago, someone sprayed tear gas in here, and two days ago, an enemy spy committed this slaughter with the piano wire. Werther listened to Ron, and showed a confused reaction.

"According to the police, the five people killed here made their livelihood with crimes. Starting with theft, they got worse and worse. Someone must have had a grudge against them."

"...I see, that's how things ended up this way." Ron nodded.

He wanted to depart right away. All the information he needed, he got from here.

"Wait, Kakaribi." Werther held him back. "What did you realize?"

"Nothing. It seems to be an incident where I can't intervene."

"That's gotta be a lie as well, right?" Werther glared at Ron with a dubious gaze.

And then, he told his subordinates to leave them alone. The soldiers didn't complain once about the orders of their captain, and left this underground room. Only Werther and Ron were left alone.

"I haven't seen [Kyokou] as of late." Werther muttered. "Is he staying healthy?"

That was Ron's former master's—Guido's codename.

"...Yeah, so much it's giving me trouble."

"Then, his hand-to-hand skill must be still as polished as ever. I once had a sparring with him. I had no chance whatsoever, but he still praised me in the end, and it's something I'm proud about."

"What do you want to say?"

"I'm not some beginner. I can sense it myself."

"I can feel evil coming from this, it's sending shivers down my spine."

"Evil?"

"Pure evil often shows the face of a saint. With the smile of a benevolent person, it uses the people unbeknownst to them, trampling down others according to their desires. That's what this feels like to me. Like the existence of this killer is overwhelmingly evil."

"....."

"We from the army will erase this person—So hand over all the information you have." Werther captured Ron in his stern, righteous gaze.

While being young, he had the pride to eradicate all injustice and evil. That must be the reason why he had so many soldiers stationed inside the town. But, Ron shook his head.

"...You don't get anything."

"Wha..."

"I admire your sense of duty. But, I have my own position as well. Don't interfere with my work any more."

Werther's face turned beet red, as his small fist started to shake.

"A mere spy...Don't underestimate the army."

"Let me give you one more piece of advice." Ron spoke indifferently. "Don't corner a spy at the sea. They'll run away from you."

That was the greatest advice Ron could have given to him. But, the person himself seemed to be too busy suffering from this insult and shame, as he just glared back at Ron.

"You're fighting again..."

Stepping outside of the underground, Lily gave an annoyed expression. She must have taken a peek inside while she was waiting.

"Don't underestimate me." Ron said. "I don't start meaningless banter."

"Eh? Was there a reason for that, then?"

“Some harassment.”

“That’s even worse!”

“They were at a disadvantage, so I went to crush the commander’s mentality a bit.”

Even so, it will be a harsh battle. All Ron could do was put faith in them. Lily tilted her head in confusion. She could not follow Ron’s words at all. But, there was one thing Ron had to tell her no matter what.

“We’ll temporarily stop chasing after the girls.”

“Eh?”

They seem to be still alive. Ron would have loved to come in for the support, but there were more important things he had to do.

“What we should work against is the possibility these girls are missing out on.”

Lily was baffled.

“Did you already figure out the situation?”

“Somewhat.”

Ron had the urge to complain even. What special subordinates he had gathered, really. With a bit more information, he could figure out the truth. The reason why these girls suddenly disappeared, and the truth behind this evil that Werther was so cautious about.

Intermission: Wicked One

Around four times a day, a passenger boat arrived at the port. In the midst of these was the so-called luxury passenger boat, which arrived at 3pm. It possessed an overall length of more than a hundred meters, holding a maximum of 500 passengers. The vast majority of these were tourists from overseas. Before, this system had been in place to allow the riches to escape from the calamity of the war, but now that ten years passed since the war, people necessary for the rebuilding of the country became the main passengers.

The people on the boat were excited at the soon-to-be arrival, but one single man was even more dubious in the midst of that—A mushroom.

The second someone dropped their gaze towards him, they focussed on the mushroom hair. Everybody that passed him gave a ‘Is there really any need to go that far?’, as they complained. Even the people working on the ship called him the ‘Mushroom Person’, and the children laughed at him.

Everybody would ridicule his hairstyle, and remember him.

—But, that was the most they remembered, as his hair caught all the attention. That was the image of the man working as a spy for the Galgado Empire, named [Shirogumo].

When Shirogumo stepped off the boat, he was disappointed at the sight of the city. No doubt did the town evolve and develop, but it wasn't anything that greatly surprised him. He had heard that the Republic of Deen had several entertainment districts, but this wasn't anything special. All he could see were giant hotels that copied the idea of what the Empire had in their culture for much longer time. Though the sheer amount declined as a result of the war, what the Empire had to offer was far superior. This must be the limit of a small nation like this, huh.

An insignificant country after all. Shirogumo scratched the back of his head. What a pain. I'd love to just ignore some small country and get on to more pressing matters.

This is the best the Republic of Deen can make up anyway. No great economical power, and even the intelligence agencies in the country are a trifling matter. They would need ten times the amount of political power to rival the Empire. Even the evaluation of spies that are being sent out are a joke. If another war broke out, this country would get trampled by the empire.

But, they do put a lot of resources into their spy education, alright.

The Office of Foreign Affairs—that is the Intelligence Agency located in the Republic of Deen. Even though they should have been nothing but small fries, the Empire continued to suffer defeat after defeat against them. The Empire and Republic have a similar culture and language, with the same race, and are directly adjoined to the other. There is no better condition to have spies sneak into the respective country than this.

The Republic of Deen continued to steal top secret information from the Empire. They sell this off to other major countries, and receive economical support. They have the role of monitoring the United Nations, you could say. And that is a role that every country would love to have.

A powerful spy country—this was the real identity of the ground he was walking on.

Their spy network should have been destroyed once, but it's already back to its former glory...Almost like vermin those bastards.

While Shirogumo cursed about the relationship between the Empire and the Republic, he made his way to the hotel. There was no sight of any guards around. The person he was here to see apparently did a great job in hiding. Stating his aim of stay at the reception, he went up the stairs. Acting as if he was walking in his own room, he swiftly slipped into the one next-door. Inside, a woman with blue and pale skin was lying on the bed. It was the individual Shirogumo came here to see. In the Empire, she was known under the name Matilda. Catching on to her guest, she opened her eyes wide.

“...A mushroom...”

"That's your first impression?"

Well, it's better than her screaming in shock.

"So you came for support." Matilda sighed. "I thought I had been cast aside."

"Who knows." Shirogumo shrugged. "Maybe I came here to kill you."

"Eh..."

"And secondly, I came here since [Tansui] disappeared, and planned to bring him home. If I kill you or not is up to me." Shirogumo pointed the gun at Matilda. "So, what should I do? Is there any worth in keeping you alive?"

"....."

"I smell blood coming from you." Shirogumo complained. "Did you kill someone recently? Why? You're in hiding right now."

Clearly, she seemed to be someone useless. Right when he put more strength in the finger on the trigger—

"Ufufu." Matilda gave a mysterious giggle.

"Huh?" He sent a wave of pressure and killing intent towards her.

But, even so, Matilda didn't hold back her laughter.

"Ufufufufufuhyufufufufufufufufufufufuffuhyufufufufufufufufufufuhyufufu."

While holding one hand in front of her mouth, she laughed maniacally.

...What is going on with this old lady...

When Shirogumo narrowed his eyes, Matilda stopped laughing at a heartbeat.

"The circumstances have changed~"

"Huh?"

"I should actually be able to make it out without your assistance~ I killed them for revenge, or something along these lines."

Shirogumo blinked in confusion as Matilda changed her way of talking.

Nonetheless, Matilda continued her explanation.

"But, it's true that I had a lot of trouble, you know~ Surrounded by these trash army soldiers, had my work tools stolen, I was actually troubled in the truest sense. So I thought I might as well kill all the army soldiers. I was going to, but then I stopped." That's where she showed a disgusting grin.

"But, a miracle occurred. I ran into my daughter, which I had been separated from a long time ago."

"Huh. A moving reunion, huh. How touching."

Shirogumo gave a nonchalant response because he couldn't be bothered with such a mundane topic. Following that, she pointed at a cobalt blue tool box in the corner of the room.

"I hit her with that."

"Huh?"

It looked like an object made of iron, so Shirogumo was confused

"I hit her, hit her, and hit her again. So much that she lost her memories, thrown away by me, and now she actually saved me. She fully forgot about me hitting her, and even called me 'Mother'! Without even knowing that I'm

using her!” Her laughter erupted. “Really, what a stupid, and foolish daughter of mine!”

Seeing her eyes, filled with ecstasy and madness, Shirogumo was at a loss for words. This woman’s done for. He had no concrete information about her situation, but apparently she was using her own daughter to escape. That was just fine, because it meant Shirogumo had no need to intervene too much. Because his philosophy— told him to not engage too much into this. So, he lowered his gun.

“...I understand that you’re a crazy fellow, but I’ll leave this as a pass. At least wash off the stench, otherwise other people will figure it out immediately.”

“Yes, thank you very much.”

“I leave the rest to you. I’ll do my own thing, so just get home safely.”

That was the most comfortable for him. But, there was one thing he needed to confirm.

“Hey, do you really not feel anything for your child?”

“Not at all?” Matilda said in an indifferent tone. “Because she’s disgusting, that girl.” She said, as if she talked about a person she hated.

Thus, the stage had been prepared.

—The selected group of [Tomoshihi]: Monika, Tia, Elna, and Annette.

—Werther Bart and his group of army soldiers.

—The spy of the Empire, Matilda, who was using her daughter to escape.

—The boss and member of [Tomoshihi], chasing after the girls.

—The mysterious spy of the Empire that had appeared for the endgame, [Shirogumo].

Purposes, feelings, and strategy mixed together, as the feast of spies began.

1 Torchlight

2 White Spider

3 Reminder: Tansui was the name Roland (Shikabane) had in the Empire

Chapter 5: Evil and Conflict

According to the weather report, starting at midnight, it would rain all the way to morning. At 10pm, the sky was covered with thick clouds. The level of humidity rose, as the inside of one's throat grew damp with each breath you took. It was only a matter of time until it would start raining. Inside of this darkness, untouched by moonlight, three battles began.

Two of these led to the start of this long night.

Around the vicinity of the port stood various warehouses. Near the piers for cargo ships were warehouses to temporarily store imported goods, and at a location further away from that, they were storing the old ships in other storehouses. Normally, these ships were not used. It felt like a graveyard for ships, as they pushed all broken ships in there.

Normally, at 10pm, nobody should approach this location this late.

However, at a time like this, soldiers were gathered here and there still.

Captain Werther ordered a small squad to be stationed here at night time.

He had expected that the spy on the escape might attempt a mad dash back home. With a tension-filled expression, these soldiers were walking around the vicinity with handguns ready—Or so the girls found out after looking into it. Inside the ship storehouse, they were holding their breaths.

"Let me go over the plan once more." Tia called out to the other girls. "We can only use this port to have Matilda-san escape. There's the option of using the highway or train station, but as long as she stays inside the country borders, she will continuously get chased."

The same was the case for any prolonged stay in this city. Tonight was their last chance, most likely.

"There's a cargo ship that leaves at 11pm. Most of the cargo for the day has already been sent off, but the last bit always leaves at night. We'll have Matilda-san hide in there. Following that, we'll create a diversion, have all the workers working here evacuate, and guide the army soldiers away."

Annette and Elna nodded. There was a small hole in the storehouse's wall, which Monika used to monitor the situation outside.

"There it is, the blue iron container. I confirmed the number as well, it's [3-896].

Just as planned, the package arrived. Tia gave it one last check, and then headed over to where Matilda was hiding.

“Um...” Matilda spoke up, clearly anxious. “Is this going to work? Slipping into the cargo...”

“Usually, that won’t work. They’re wooden boxes or barrels. No way would a human fit into there.”

“Figures...”

“But, container transport is slowly being adapted here in this country. Around half of the cargo is already in containers. With that, a human can easily slip inside, which creates an easy escape for spies.”

The standardized cargo services to a great efficiency when transporting wares. Scientific progress is moving forward at an insane speed, connecting the countries of this world. That is one of the reasons why spies can now work secretly, and more easily to boot.

“But, aren’t the soldiers aware of this as well...”

“During this time frame, four cargo ships are about to leave.”

As for the other three, they haven’t finished loading the cargo yet. There should still be countless containers around. If she slipped into one of these, she should be safe.

“And, we’ll have you travel with a ship heading to the Lairat Kingdom, and not the Empire.”

Otherwise, the chances of her getting spotted are much higher. First, break free of this situation, and then return to the Empire by using a different route. She should be fine on her own once she makes it back to the Lairat Kingdom.

Since the containers are set up so that you can’t open them from the inside, Tia handed Matilda a tool to break out for that, a gas burner with a length of 50 centimeters.

“Annette made this. It can easily burn through iron.”

In a mere few hours, Annette created this, and gave it the seal of approval with a ‘It’s a trusted invention of the great me!’, and Matilda took it into her hands like it was something precious to her. Her body even stopped shaking. With this, their strategy had been planned out to the very end.

Tia returned to Monika, who oddly enough had her eyes wide open.

“.....” She froze up, as if she was thinking about something.

“Did something happen?” Tia asked, concerned about that expression of Monika.

“...No, nothing at all?” Monika shrugged her shoulders. “It just felt like you were doing a better job at giving out orders than Ron-san. How’s it feel for once?”

“...I’ve gotten used to your provocations as well.”

“The responsibility as a commander is pretty high after all. If you fail, we’ll get executed.”

“Don’t threaten me like that...It’s fine, I already made up my determination.”

Hearing this, Monika separated from Tia, waving her hand with a bothered ‘Huh, how boring’. But, Tia wasn’t shaken by this.

"To be honest, I'm not really that worried."

"Huh, and why is that?"

"Don't I always tell you. If we work together, we're invincible."

Monika waved her hand again.

"Thanks for that, I guess."

With that, the time had come.

"It's operating!" Annette spoke up.

When Tia and the others moved towards the door of the storehouse, they saw white smoke coming from the port. The device they had set up at noon has started running. Using binoculars, Tia observed the scene. The army soldiers gathered at the scene, and started evacuating the workers.

Illumination filled the night sky, looking like giant arms.

Swiftly, the workers started to disappear. Next, they had to pull away the army soldiers from the scene.

"What a bother." Monika complained, holding a telescope.

"Yes, there's a lot of soldiers."

"Not that. I have a mirror at the third pier."

Monika had previously prepared her mirrors, disguised as trash so that they wouldn't stand out. Using these, Monika had an overview of the entire port.

"I can't see it with the binoculars." Tia grumbled.

"It's Army Captain Werther Bart. He came to the scene. I heard he's a prodigy."

"Huh...I heard he's a good man, but I wonder about that."

"I got no interest in his face, but he's got the skill to back it up. He's giving the orders."

If Monika said this, then he must be a dangerous individual. But, no matter who it may be, pulling back was no option. Tia was about to take one step outside—

"Wait!" Elna jumped at her, pushing her over to the side.

—Right after, the ground at Tia's feet burst open.

Someone shot at her? Realizing that she would have most likely been killed if not for Elna, Tia felt shivers running down her spine.

What is going on...? Did they figure out our location? But, from where did that shot come from?

She hid her body inside the storehouse again. A bullet had pierced the ground. It seemed to have been shot from quite a distance. Together with the panic and confusion, Tia felt her blood freeze. Was this a tactic of Captain Bart? No, that can't be. This must be something outside their expectations.

Next to her, Elna's body shook in fear, and her face was pale white. Never had Tia seen the girl in such a terrified state.

"You shouldn't go outside right now." She forced out a dry voice. "Elna has a really bad feeling about this."

"Thank you, Elna." Tia rubbed Elna on the head. "But, things are pretty bad nonetheless."

A roaring sound passed them. The army soldiers stationed around the vicinity reacted approaching Tia and the others.

"We're in a pinch right off the bat, huh." Monika touched the gun she had hidden in her chest pocket. "What should we do? At this rate, we'll get surrounded by the soldiers."

If they stayed in the same warehouse, it wouldn't take long for them to get cornered. But, ignoring Elna's warning and facing the mysterious sniper was too dangerous as well.

What misfortune...is what I'd love to say.

Tia bit her lip at this impending danger.

The first battle began—With the participants being the selected unit of [Tomoshihi], and the Army Intelligence Bureau, led by Captain Werther Bart.

Shirogumo moved away from the scope, and tilted his head in slight confusion.

"She dodged it? How?"

He hid his mushroom hair with a knitted hat, wearing a mask on his face. He clearly looked like a suspicious person, but nobody was around to even see him. At a hotel near the port, Shirogumo was creeping with his gun ready to fire. Though it was still in construction, he was stationed up on the seventh floor. Only the beams and floor were finished, and the walls were the next to be worked on. Using a new rifle developed by the Empire, the distance you could accurately shoot at an enemy run up to around 300 meters.

However, the distance between the port and the hotel he was currently located at rounded up to a kilometer. Normally, sniping someone at such a distance would prove impossible, but Shirogumo individually improved his rifle, and after a bit of handicraft work, he managed to turn it into something like a sniper rifle.

Holding the rifle—or rather, the sniper rifle—Shirogumo started thinking. Hearing Matilda's story, Shirogumo decided to let her move freely, instead of killing her on the spot. Because he felt like something was off about this relationship between her and her daughter, as well as her daughter's allies. —A spy that would help an enemy spy?

Foolish, and way too naive. What were they thinking?

—Lack of experience?

Something didn't add up. What popped up inside Shirogumo's head was the information about a new spy team the Republic had created. It consisted of one man, and seven girls that were mere drop-outs at their respective educational facilities. He had to look into that some more.

"Well, I'll kill one, and see how things turn out."

He planned to act as soon as Matilda did. He started with that shot just now, but she managed to dodge it. Maybe she felt the impending danger, or another reason allowed her to survive that.

"The soldiers caught on to it as well, so they should be leaving soon."
Shirogumo glanced through the scope. "Now, will you get surrounded by the soldiers, or get shot by me—What do you prefer, I wonder?"
Killing the target at an overwhelmingly superior position was an easy feat for him, and what Shirogumo preferred to do, taking the route with the least risk for himself. After all, this is the Republic of Deen. He would rather not run into the man **you should not encounter under any circumstances.**

"!"

Then, Shirogumo picked up killing intent directed at him, and rolled over his body. It came out of nowhere, leaving him surprised. At his back stood a tall man.

"So you realized. I'll praise you for that, at least."

That man spoke, and revealed his identity. Shirogumo could feel the confidence emitting from the man's body, as he didn't even have a gun in his hand.

"...Huh?" Shirogumo screamed inside his heart.

He rushed to get up, but his knees were shaking. The man in front of him sent Shirogumo a cold gaze.

"And, the only ones that react to my face are spies of the Empire."

"...Don't joke with me."

Of course Shirogumo knew of the man. He was the most dangerous individual the Republic of Deen had to offer. The enemy you should not encounter under any circumstances. No matter how many assassins the Empire sent after him, he continued to shake them off with ease, a real life monster. He was also the spy who snuck into the research facility that had been riddled with traps, stealing back the biological weapon—In the Republic of Deen, his codename was [Kakaribi].

"Stop joking with meeee! Why are you heeeere!?" Shirogumo started running.

Only carrying his beloved sniper rifle, he left all his other tools behind. He didn't anticipate an encounter like this. Even though he was prepared for everything. But, meeting him in person was even more terrifying than he could have imagined. For now, he aimed to escape with the stairs, but...

"I sealed off the stairs."

His feet stopped. The only possible exit had been blocked with toxic-looking foam.

...What is going on with this foam...?

It was like a wall that built up in front of him. It must have been the work of someone besides [Kakaribi]. When he touched it with the tip of his finger, it started to feel sore. He was dealing with poison, and hesitated. He wasn't as reckless as to jump right into this pool of poisonous foam.

Whoever thought of this has gotta have the most rotten personality I've ever seen...!

Slashing it with his knife, the foam split in two, nothing more. Shooting it with a gun, it separated, but didn't dissolve. Shirogumo saw no means of breaking through this wall of foam. At the same time, he heard approaching footsteps from his back.

"How did you know I was here?" Shirogumo asked, his voice shaking.

"By pure chance."

He had no concrete reason, and yet his words were overflowing with confidence. The only way to even catch up on Shirogumo's invasion would be to feel it by intuition.

"Why do I have to fight a monster like you!" Shirogumo screamed in rage. The second battle began—With the participants being the invading spy of the Empire, Shirogumo, and the boss of [Tomoshibi], Ron.

Elna apparently had picked up on this change, as her nose twitched.

"The danger disappeared...?"

"How convenient. Then, let's go." Monika jumped out.

The girls took a formation that pushed Matilda into the middle, and started moving. Luckily, they seemed to have made it just in time before the soldiers surrounded them. Using the shadows of the warehouses nearby, they slipped through the gaps, unseen. In the event that they were surrounded, they slipped into a nearby building. Of course, they were aiming for the cargo ship pier. Two people were crucial for this.

"Stop. There's one guy if we turn the corner here." Monika used the view on her mirrors to announce the locations of army soldiers.

"Elna feels an unlucky presence to the west." Elna used her senses to filter out any possible misfortune.

The two of them moved through the vicinity like magic, unseen by anybody, which left Matilda baffled. Apparently, mechanics as such were a rare sight with spies of the Empire. But, Tia was just as surprised, mainly because of Monika. While moving along, she recovered all the mirrors she had set up, threw it again, and moved forward. Be it the path ahead, or the path behind them, she had a clear view on everything.

"Alright, we'll keep going like this."

At a time, she even checked more than two mirrors, judging the situation at a place even further away. When her own eyes weren't enough, she used the telescope. Normally, keeping focus on all of these things at the same time, while running even, would sound impossible, but she has it all figured out. Thanks to that, they managed to make good progress. So much that Matilda was starting to get out of breath.

"Listen..." Tia knew this wasn't the timing, but she couldn't hold back a remark. "I never see you use that skill during our practice with Sensei, you know?"

"Because I never used it."

"...So you were holding back."

"Don't be like that. I just didn't use it because that wouldn't have been enough to win against Ron-san anyway."

Well, that was just like her.

"But, that's as far as it goes." Monika stopped running.

Once they made it fairly close to the pier, the girls slowed down, hiding in the shadows of a truck that stopped near the port. Quite the number of soldiers was strolling around the pier. The girls could even hear the enraged words coming from them. They seemed to have been running around to catch the spy causing the ruckus.

"Seems like they finished evacuating everybody. All that's left is to remove all these soldiers, and help Matilda-san into one of the containers." Monika calmly analyzed the situation.

Around thirty other army soldiers were lurking around the containers. The entire place was lit up, allowing not a single speck of darkness. Charging in up-front definitely won't work. They must have read the intent of the girls.

"Not good...It feels like we're surrounded." Elna muttered in a worried tone.

Tia nodded. "We can only move away for now. Let's give them a present while we're here."

They might still be able to guide the army soldiers away, so they left an explosive beneath the truck. Tia turned around.

"Matilda-san, can you run?"

"S-Somewhat..." Her shoulders were moving up and down as she groaned. Her endurance seemed to be running low quite a bit. Annette grinned, and stole Matilda's tool box with a 'I'll hold this for you!', to which Matilda gave a happy "Thank you" back. Watching the bonds of mother and child, Tia turned towards the leader of the group, who was peeking through the telescope.

"Monika, where should we move next—"

"....."

Tia saw Monika's serious expression, and stopped her words. She apparently was using the mirrors again to check out the situation.

"Hey, Tia." Monika muttered, not separating her eyes from the telescope.

"How should we lessen the number of soldiers?"

"Isn't that obvious? Approach them, set up an explosive trap, pull back, and repeat."

"Pretty difficult. They weren't shaken as much from the first explosion. They must have quite the calm command."

Tia listened to Monika's evaluation, and bit her lip. Was this the work of Captain Bart? Less soldiers than they had hoped for eventually disappeared. This might just turn into a drawn-out war.

"Indeed. But, in order to avoid any risks, we can only—"

"Again with that naivety of yours." Monika flashed an arrogant grin. "That's the method of a good child—hurting nobody, exposing nobody to danger."

"Then what else can we do?"

"My, let me tell you." Monika said, and put away the telescope. Instead, she took out her beloved revolver.

"Annette, could you give me all the explosives and smokescreens you have." Before Tia could say anything, Annette already handed over the weapons. Monika took these explosives, and threw them forward. She shot them mid-air with her revolver, and flung them towards the soldiers. Right after, a raging fire and loud explosive sound filled the night sky. "...!"

"Take Matilda-san with you."

Compared to Tia, who was absolutely baffled, her other allies reacted quickly. Elna and Annette swiftly grabbed Matilda's arms, and started running. As if to hide them, Monika threw the smokescreens. As for Tia, she still didn't move. Even if the explosions did a great job, she couldn't leave a comrade alone in a battlefield like this.

"Do you plan on dying?"

"Oh hell no."

What followed next completely surpassed anything Tia would have imagined. Monika put on her robe, put on a mask—and jumped out of the shadows of the truck. Armed with rifles and pistols, the soldiers were confused at the sudden gallant appearance of Monika, even grinning broadly.

"There they are!"

Naturally, the soldiers immediately reacted to the appearance of Monika. They even had the permission to kill it seems, as they pointed their guns at her. Five out of those were ready to shoot, their fingers on the trigger. At the same time, Monika stood alone, illuminated by the floodlights, as if she stood on stage. She calmly took out a dagger, and readied it in her hand.

"Hey, you remember how Ron-san deflected Shikabane's bullet with a knife?" Without looking at Tia, Monika spoke up.

What is she talking about, in a situation like this? Tia started to grasp it. But, reflecting a bullet with a knife is a skill only super top-class spies possessed. Yet, Monika calmly continued.

"You think I can do it as well?"

"Huh?"

Ridiculous, is what Tia thought, as a shiver went down her spine. She was attempting to execute that skill without ever having practiced it once... Against army soldiers! With several people at the same time! In the face of actual bullets! This was nothing short of insanity.

Monika took a deep breath, and observed the army soldiers, as she muttered something to herself.

"...Angle...Distance...Speed...Timing...I don't have a focal point and reverberation, but it could be worse..."

She was calculating. She was honestly trying to deflect the bullets. Tia had to stop her no matter what. But, Monika was already too focused that Tia's voice didn't reach her. Instead, the army soldiers took the first move.

“Shoot! Don’t let the spy escape!”

That voice must have been Captain Bart. He stood at the front line with the other four people, pulling the triggers. Following that, a metallic **clank** sound rang out.

“—!!!”

Monika stood still, not showing any wounds on her body. In reality, she had dodged four bullets, and reflected the fifth. Not only Tia was baffled, but so were the soldiers as well. Even Captain Bart, as he didn’t issue another order.

“Huh.” Monika’s cheeks relaxed a bit. “Wasn’t too hard.” Checking the blade of the dagger, she gave Tia a word. “I’ll hold them back, so you protect the folks.”

“...!”

Tia started running. With no hesitation, she jumped into the smokescreen, and chased after the others. At her back, she heard Monika’s voice.

“I’ll make sure not to kill ya, Captain Bart.” She raised her gun, and shot the floodlight.

Immediately, the area around her grew dark. And, she started running... towards the opposite direction of Tia. Gunshots started to fill the surroundings, getting further away from Tia. Clearly, the soldiers were chasing Monika.

Jesus, she can be so reliable once she becomes an ally.

Tia could only pray for Monika’s success. And put faith in her talent.

Through Monika’s efforts, Captain Bart’s command started to break apart, and turned the area around the port into chaos.

Let’s move back to the hotel that was a fairly long distance away from the port.

Right that moment, a pathetic shriek of fear rang out.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

A man was running for his life, tears in his eyes. Wholeheartedly, is probably a fitting term. Gritting his teeth as he bared them, he pushed out his chest, looking like a child during a dash. Barely managing to avoid the bullets fired at him by Ron, he focussed only on running.

“That’s not a noise a spy should make,” Ron commented, as he reloaded.

“Shut up! As if I’d try fighting a monster like you!” The man shouted, as he ran inside this building’s floor, only equipped with floor and beams.

Several tools had been scattered on the floor, but the man skillfully evaded them. Not satisfied, Ron continued to chase after him. He had his guesses as to why Tia and the others did not get into contact with Ron. They must be planning to let this person, clearly related to Annette, escape. Leaving aside right and wrong here, Ron instead decided to focus on the possible allies that this spy had. Because just like [Homura], who would go to save their allies, someone might have been sent by the Empire.

With that in mind, Ron spotted this man, giving off a suspicious vibe. And, he attacked him here at an empty location, which led to the current situation, but...it felt like this man was nothing special.

What is with this man...?

Ron conflicted at the lack of skill the man in front of him apparently possessed.

"So fast! For fuck's sake!" While cursing, the man continued to run. Because of the knitted cap and mask, Ron could not see his face. He should be in his twenties, but he had no way of making sure.

He's quick at running away, that's for sure...

Ron gave around 70% of what he had to offer. He was by no means underestimating the man. There were two reasons for this. First, he was aware of any possible trap. And secondly, he could overwhelm most enemies with just 70%. Yet, he could not catch up to that man. His bullets were being evaded, and yet the man didn't lose any speed.

I'm keeping up quite the speed to chase him. That shows enough skill on his end.

But, no matter how fast he would be able to run, Lily had sealed off the exit with poisonous foam. He could technically jump off, but Ron would not let this chance go to waste.

"! Seems like this will be a battle of endurance!" The enemy seemed to have guessed that conclusion himself, and clicked his tongue. "Not like I could win there either!"

The man chose to go up a floor. This multistory building is being built up from the ground. From the first to seventh floor, you had actual floors, and not just provisional footholding. But, going up from seventh to eighth floor, it was nothing but the mere limit to have the building stand. Using this, the man ran up to the eighth floor. Naturally, Ron followed him.

On this eighth floor, leaving aside the walls, not even the floor was implemented. The steel beams only formed a net that someone could walk on. If one's footing vanished, the next station would be the seventh floor again. The man managed to skillfully keep his balance up on these steel beams, and Ron tried to disrupt that with his gun.

Yet again, the man raised a shriek, and frantically deflected the bullets with his knife.

Not everybody should be able to pull off something like that, and yet...

Unexpectedly, he showed a higher-ranking skill of a spy.

—Just who is he?

Ron had no knowledge of him. It seemed to be a spy that the Office of Foreign Intelligence had no intel on.

"You seem to be fairly skilled at hand-to-hand combat." Ron stopped his feet on top of a steel beam, and threw some words at the man. "Why not try and attack me? You might just win?"

"Don't provoke me now." The man stopped all the same. "It's gonna end bloody. For me, that is." The man shook his head in disbelief.

And then, he started bargaining.

"I'm only here to gather intel. Sneak in here, get what I want, and leave. I don't like to fight."

"Your movement just now tells another story."

"Can it. I'm just being pushed around all the time." The man clicked his tongue.

Though half of his face had been hidden by the mask, Ron could tell that he was frustrated.

He can join in on the conversation just fine as well. What a weird fellow.

Ron felt like something was off. Was he just too relaxed, or too scared to even think?

"If you're going to squeeze some information out of me, then let me do the same." The man asked. "One of our spies called [Tansui] had been off communication. You heard anything about that?"

"Who is that?"

"He looks like a living corpse. He's a friggin romanticist, and does whatever he feels like."

Ron had an idea. He must be talking about [Shikabane]. And, the codename the empire had given him apparently was [Tansui]. Though the whole romanticist thing sounded a bit off to Ron. For now, he decided to act careless.

"No clue. But, since you're looking for him, he must be a dangerous fellow, so I'll keep that in mind."

"How shrewd. Well, I can guess myself."

"...I can just have you tell me everything after I captured you alive."

Facing each other, there was no deceiving involved anymore. All that was left to do was a raw hand-to-hand combat fight.

"I guess I'll get a bit more serious then."

Ron packed away his gun, and readied his knife.

"Oh lord help me..." The man was about to break out in tears, but Ron wasn't too bothered by that.

Kicking off one of the steel beams, he ran—or rather slipped along the beams. Because of the humidity, the top of the steel beams ended up slippery, robbing it of any friction. Thus, Ron reached the man even faster than if he just ran. The man tried to jump back, but couldn't beat Ron's speed. With another kick, Ron already made it to his throat, moving the knife towards it.

The man pushed out his right hand, and barely managed to deflect it. Apparently, he had something hidden beneath his clothes, as a metal clashing on metal-esque sound rang out. But, the impact was more than enough.

Giving in to the impact, Ron pushed the man off the steel beam. His body floated in the air—but, Ron didn't let off just yet, and fired his gun. In Ron's case, he was using a revolver, and being fairly skilled at it, he could pull off a quick draw. Changing the hand he held the knife with, it took a mere

second to pull that off. Immediately, two shots were headed at the man's temple.

The first shot he redirected with his knife, and the second one grazed his cheek, tearing off the mask.

"Shit, you're way too strong..."

The man fell down to the seventh floor, and let out a groan as he hit the ground. At the same time, Ron landed softly. He was planning on defeating the man, and restraining him...

"——!"

Ron stopped his feet. During their fall, the man's knitted hat fell off, as well as the mask, revealing the man's face. Seeing this, Ron was at a loss for words. The first thing that entered his eyes was the shape of a mushroom. He could guess that the man was in his early twenties, but the rest of his face was hidden by the rather peculiar hair style.

"Ah, you got the same reaction, huh." The man ran his fingers through his hair. "How is it? I really like this hair."

"That's not it." Ron swiftly denied the man's words.

Ron was shocked for a different reason. The hairstyle might be different now, but his facial features were oddly familiar.

"This is the second time I met you."

"Huh?"

"At the Endy Research Facility."

It was an institution located in the Empire. On the outside, it looked like a pharmaceutical company, but it was actually a top-secret military experimental lab of the Empire. And, Ron had not forgotten. He couldn't say for sure back then, but now—Ron knew.

"...You are the sniper who killed [Kyokou]...My Teacher, right?"

He had robbed the last bit of hope for Guido's survival. Ron was baffled, because the image and act of these two don't match up at all. The man in front of him was the type to scream in fear, and run away like a coward. And he was supposed to be the person Ron had searched for so long?

"...Do you belong to [Hebi]?"

[Hebi]. The mysterious organization that killed the members of [Homura], and even Ron's teacher. In other words, the target of Ron's revenge.

"....."

The man stood up, not saying a word, and brushed away the dirt in his clothes.

"So you saw me from that far away. You really are a freak." He gazed at his beloved sniper rifle.

"This is the worst. Now my chance at survival has dropped even lower."

Without even trying to hide his terrified expression, the man—who later named himself as [Shirogumo] later, raised the corners of his mouth.

Tia caught up with Elna and the others, and hid in a nearby warehouse.

Though the warehouse itself was locked, using Annette's gas burner, they

could break it open. During their escape, even without using Monika's **eyes**, relying on Elna's **intuition** was more than enough, since the entire port was wrapped up in chaos now. The stench of misfortune came from everywhere, or so she said. Just from the sounds around, it was clear that the army was in an uproar.

"Monika-oneechan is creating a ruckus." Elna muttered.

Monika was currently handling tens of army soldiers, betting her life in a literal shower of bullets headed her way, opening a path for the others to run away. Not to mention that she isn't going to kill anybody. They could not let this chance she gave them go to waste.

"Let's look at the timing, split up, and search for the container. It's a blue one with the number 3-896. Annette, did you prepare the radio communication?" Tia called out to Annette, who was working on something. She had four small radio machines taken out, but tilted her head.

"The great me can't prepare them. They're broken."

"Eh..."

Tia was at a loss because of this sudden state of emergency, when Matilda carefully opened her mouth.

"Um...They are probably interfering with the communication the army soldiers have set up..."

"Can you fix that?"

"If I can have five minutes, yes."

Matilda stole some tools from Annette with a 'Let me have that for a second', and worked on the radio machines. After carefully observing it for a moment, she started playing with the wiring.

"I'll watch this with great interest!" Annette muttered next to her, gleefully watching this.

".....Mm." Elna muttered quietly.

Tia felt the anxiety from Elna.

—Matilda is a spy of the empire.

She might just be an excellent engineer. Because she has great knowledge concerning machinery. She was an existence Tia and the others tried to help escape.

"....." Of course, it's not like Tia wasn't thinking anything.

Then, an army soldier came into the warehouse, a bit more fat on the ribs than you would normally see.

"" "...!" ""

Elna, Annette, and Matilda all took a cautious stance.

"Calm down, he's an ally of mine." Tia reassured them.

During the noon, Tia actually managed to succeed in winning over a soldier. She saw him eating lunch all alone, so she went and seduced him, turning him into an ally.

"D-Don't scare us like that." Elna sighed.

"Sorry, I wasn't sure if he could properly join us or not."

That was a lie. Tia actually kept this a secret from her allies. She accepted information on the current standing from the man, and gave him orders to create a bit of havoc. Once they were finished talking, Tia whispered a seductive ‘I’ll give you your reward another time, okay?’, to which the man blushed furiously as he left the warehouse. Tia swiftly glanced over at Matilda, who already restarted her work on the radio machines.

“.....”

It seems like there was a need to have a final talk with her.

“...Phew, it’s done.”

Shortly after, Matilda finished her work in the blink of an eye.

“Alright, then let’s go.” Tia nodded.

The girls jumped out of the warehouse, dashing at full speed, and arrived at the pier. Containers were still lingering around everywhere, as well as wooden boxes and barrels, so they weren’t in need of any place to hide. As for the few army soldiers that still lingered around, the soldiers under Tia’s command gave them fake information, and lured them elsewhere.

The floodlights were focussed away as well, most likely thanks to Monika’s work. In this darkness, the girls, trained as spies, had no problem moving. This container they were looking for should be around here somewhere. Tia gave orders to Annette and Elna to split up and search for it.

“Hey, Matilda-san.” But, Tia never moved away from Matilda.

She called out to her when her allies were walking off.

“...Could we talk for a moment?”

“Tia-san, we really should be searching for the container now.”

“Just a bit is fine.”

“The others might be in danger if we don’t find it soon.” Matilda was adamant on searching for the container, not backing down.

If Tia could exchange a gaze with her for at least three seconds, she would be able to read the desire in her heart. But, the other person was constantly moving their gazes around the vicinity, offering no such chance.

“Matilda-san, this is something very important.” Tia however didn’t let up, and grabbed her arm. “Tell me—Were you going to kill that soldier just now?”

“.....” Matilda didn’t say anything.

It felt like Tia touched on a bad topic.

“I felt killing intent coming from you. You had that screwdriver ready to slash his throat, right? And it looked like you were used to it.”

“.....”

The reason Tia had called that army soldiers to them—was to check for Matilda’s reaction.

“What is this about? Didn’t you say you never killed a person?”

“.....”

“Answer me. If you choose to keep silent any further, I will leave you behind at this port.”

“Huh~” Matilda shook away Tia’s hand.

Unlike usual, that action was rough, and almost indifferent. On top of that, she pressed both her hands on her mouth, as if to hide a smile. It was a gesture she never showed before.

“...Are you really doubting me this late into the game~?”

“—!”

It was a vicious voice clinging to your ears. From the gap between her fingers, a muffled laugh escaped.

“You’re way too late~ Only doubting me now. How dense can you be?”

“...So you were deceiving us?”

“Indeed. I was planning on using my daughter to make it home safely, but you others were even more useful than I thought, so I decided I might as well use that. And, you really saved me, believing my lie this easily.”

“You!” Tia pointed her gun at her.

The other person was showing a face that had been hidden all this time. She could not overlook that.

“I cannot let you escape. I will shoot you right here.”

However, the other person didn’t seem scared.

“—Why not shoot me then?”

Tia put her finger on the trigger.

“...I will shoot you.”

“Go ahead? But, how are you going to explain this to my daughter?” She pointed in the direction of Annette. “You planned to save her mother, but the situation changed and now you killed her—That’s it? After getting her hopes up? How cruel. Even though you don’t have anything that would be convincing enough.”

“You...”

“You can’t, right? You have no proof. Because my acting was too perfect.”

“...!”

“Tia-san, you are too much of a nobody. Naive, and easy to be led around the nose. I’ve never met someone as blatantly good-willed and easy as you.” After speaking for a moment, Matilda smiled. “It’s too late. You have already lost the second you took me here.”

Tia bit her lip. Trying to suppress her anger at Matilda, she was struggling to find a solution for this situation. Should she shoot, or should she not?

After being provoked for so long, could she really stay quiet? She had to remove her. That’s why Tia put more strength in her finger, when—

“But of course, that was just a joke~”

—Matilda removed her hands from her mouth. What was revealed there was the smile of a saint.

“I am thankful to you, Tia-san, and I love my daughter even now. Once I make it back to my country, I will definitely retire as a spy. I was just taken by surprise before. What I’m saying right now is the truth. I just meant to tease you a bit as a Senpai in a sense.”

“.....”

As if her attitude just now had been a lie, Matilda just kindly tilted her head a bit. Her smile resembled an older Onee-san, who loved to tease others. The sight of her just now made Tia feel like she was watching an illusion before.

"You wouldn't take my joke serious just to kill me, right?"

".....!"

"Even though one of your allies calls me 'Mother'?"

"———!"

Tia was hit with a strong emotion; Despair. Just as Matilda stated, Tia had no proof that would rectify shooting her. Could she really kill her just because she felt some killing intent coming from her towards that soldier? Could she use this explanation to satisfy Annette in any way? No, Tia had already lost.

Even if she can't figure out Matilda's real personality, Tia was forced to save her either way.

The tips of Tia's fingers were shaking, and she couldn't put any strength into them. She couldn't kill it. She couldn't pull the trigger. There, Tia heard a voice coming from the radio.

<I found the container!> It was Annette.

Matilda smiled. "Let's go, Tia-san."

".....Yes." Tia sighed without any strength, lowering the gun.

Tia had no time nor means to find out if what Matilda said was actually the truth. She even tried to keep eye contact for three seconds, but her gaze was averted swiftly. All Tia could do was move together with Matilda.

The container Annette had spotted was located outside the actual pier. The blue color made it even harder to see in the darkness, but it definitely said [3 896] on it. Annette had already opened the lock, and opened the container. The inside was filled with wheat flour, stuffed into a great number of bags, so a single woman like Matilda easily fit in.

"This means we'll have to break up. Everyone, thank you very much."

Matilda turned towards the others after she climbed inside.

Of course, she showed her usual smile. Was that because of relief, or because she knew she had won?

"...Annette." Tia's voice was filled with bitterness. "You have thirty seconds."

"The great me?"

"Say your goodbyes. And make it as kindly as possible."

That was the last possible resistance Tia could think of. To appeal to Matilda with her daughter's feelings. She had to make sure that Matilda at least didn't break her promise. For a second, Annette was confused. Apparently, she didn't get what Tia was hinting at. At the same time, Matilda just stared at her daughter.

"....."

"....."

The first ten seconds passed in absolute silence. Just like at the restaurant back then. Right when Tia panicked, Annette finally opened her mouth. "I almost forgot." She clapped her hands together. "I need to give you back the tool box." Annette picked up the tool box at her feet, and wanted to hand it over to Matilda.

"....."

Matilda couldn't accept the tool box. She just stared at it.

"—" She called Annette by name. "Won't you come with me?"

"I don't want to." Annette gave an immediate response. "I want to stay with the others."

"I see..." Matilda nodded. "Then, you can keep this tool box."

"Are you sure?" Annette's eyes lit up.

Following that, she slightly flipped up her skirt, put her hand inside, and took out another tool box.

"Then, I'll give you my own tool box! It'll be a trade!"

Matilda's eyes opened wide. The tool box Annette held in her hand was the exact one that belonged to Matilda.

"A perfect copy...I see, so you made this." Matilda muttered.

At the same time, Tia remembered. When they were trying to get back Matilda's tool box from those thieves, Annette had created a copy. After that, she had used this as her own tool box.

"Now we have a shared memory!" Annette smiled.

With a mixture of complicated expressions, Matilda accepted the tool box from her daughter.

"...Goodbye." "Goodbye!"

That was their last farewell. With an innocent smile, Annette closed the container.

"....." Tia could only watch this in silence.

"Aneki." Annette took Tia's hand. "Thank you, for granting my wish." She grinned, showing her white teeth.

Tia returned the grip.

...That's right. Overthinking it won't help. My main goal was to protect this smile after all.

Either way, what had been done cannot be rewinded. Even if she regretted her choices, nothing would change. All she could do was put faith in the innocent smile in front of her.

The first battle, between the selected girls of [Tomoshibi], and the army troops commanded by Captain Werther Bart, came to an end. The soldiers were left in chaos, and Matilda had escaped.

—The selected team of [Tomoshibi] had won this battle.

Inside the hotel in progress, another battle was about to end.

From beginning to end, the overwhelming one was always Ron. As a result of that, the enemy Shirogumo had lost his mask, and had his true face

revealed. As it turns out, he was the sniper who had killed Ron's teacher Guido.

This guy's a member of [Hebi]...

Ron once again readied his knife. By the sheer coincidence, he had been taken by surprise, but there was no better chance than this. If he were to capture him, he would find out the reason behind Guido's betrayal, and receive information concerning the existence of [Hebi]. Leaning forward, he stepped into the man's territory.

"Again! Don't just get more motivation to kill me!" Shirogumo let out a shriek, frantically pulling back.

Showing such an attitude, Ron had trouble believing that he could be anywhere close to a first-rate spy. But, that must be the man's style. He could directly see the difference in strength between the two. If anything, this man was more admirable as an enemy than [Shikabane], who kept calling himself Ron's rival and whatnot.

"You're stronger than me, so why are you in such a rush?" Shirogumo wiped the sweat off his face. "I get that you're serious. I got no way of winning here. I'm about to wet my pants, man."

He surely wouldn't start pleading for his life. Ron decided to quickly restrain him before he could deliver any further resistance.

"Don't get any closer, you freak." Shirogumo lifted up the sniper rifle he had carried this entire time. "If you get one step closer, I'll fire off this bad boy." He pointed the muzzle—not at Ron, but rather at a corner of the town. Ron let out a snort.

"That's not even a worthwhile threat. Even if you fire this gun into the darkness, you won't hit anybody."

Shirogumo carried the sniper rifle with one hand, and stretched out one arm to the side. The distance to the port was around one kilometer. Without using a scope, it would be hard to hit anything. On top of that, firing with just one hand would lead to the trajectory being ruined from the recoil.

"Well, I never tried it before, but..." Shirogumo showed a grin. "—I should be able to hit someone."

"....."

His voice had an ominous tone in it. It wasn't a bluff. If anything, he probably had a field that was vastly superior to Ron's.

"Don't blame me for this. From my point of view, you seem like a cheat more than anything." Shirogumo continued without lowering his gun. "We both are unfortunate, you know that. As for you, this place couldn't be worse."

"....."

"I know about your weakness. You won't allow for a single citizen to die, right. You want to protect everybody just like [Homura] did, right?"

"....."

Ron didn't move. While having the person he loathed the most in front of him, filled with excitement and anger at the same time, even being met with

scorn and disdain—Ron couldn't move. His skill as the world's strongest had been perfectly sealed off.

"Sorry about this, but I know about every information that has been leaked. Your teacher that betrayed you told us about everything. Your physical appearance, your aspirations, your weaknesses, your skill, together with a picture of you. No matter how amazing you may be, even if you are the world's strongest—you can defeat a spy with enough information."

What stood in front of Ron was an overwhelming advantage on information. Through Guido's betrayal, the Empire had learned about almost everything regarding Ron. Seeing Ron's reaction, Shirogumo showed a grin.

"I set up a bomb inside that hotel, beneath the sofa. In five minutes, it'll explode."

"A bluff?"

"Who knows?"

Ron could not break down Shirogumo's strategy. He must have been prepared beforehand, and created means of escaping the worst case scenario, namely running into Ron. That's why he was handling this situation fairly well. At the same time, Ron knew next to nothing about Shirogumo.

"Let's strike a deal. I really don't want to die here."

"...Yeah, I'll let you go for today."

Ron could only consent to Shirogumo's idea. He had no room to choose. Going any further than this, and the army would blame him, and he won't be able to disarm the bomb.

"A question." Ron stuffed the knife into his breast pocket. "...Why did my Teacher betray us?"

"If I tell you, will you join us as well?"

Ron shook his head. Hagglings won't work with him.

"Figures." Shirogumo muttered. "So, let me ask one thing. You'll tell your superiors about me, right?"

"I remembered your face. I'm not the best, but I can draw a picture, so that you won't ever be able to get in this country."

"What is this, am I gonna get my own wanted poster? Say, what kind of name will I get?"

"Name?"

"That's important when I end up on a wanted list, right?"

Why was he that adamant on it? Of course, each country has their individual names for spies. Whereas [Tansui] was the name for the assassin inside the Empire, the Republic of Deen, and its Office of Foreign Affairs, knew the person as [Shikabane]. Most likely, the man in front of him would receive similar treatment. So, Ron took in all the information he had, and created a name for him.

"Mushroom Man."

"Please go with [Shirogumo]. I can't bear to know someone talks about me like that."

That must be his real codename. He might just change it right away, but Ron stuffed it into his memories.

"Shirogumo, we settle this the next time we meet."

"I really don't ever wanna meet you again!" Shirogumo screamed. "Next time, we'll dispatch someone more fit for you. Because we know how to deal with you know." Shirogumo raised the corners of his mouth, running his hand through his mushroom hair. "Either way, it's all over. You're not the only individual that your teacher leaked information about. There's other skilled people in the Republic, aspiring spies, everything. You get what I'm trying to say? No matter who might come over, we can take care of you. Nobody is safe. At the point where your teacher betrayed you, this country lost all hope." Shirogumo spoke, confident.

His expression was filled with leisure and composure. However, Ron was certain about something.

"...I'm relieved."

"Huh?" A confused voice came from Shirogumo.

"It seems as if [Hebi] isn't that great of a threat after all."

He had evaluated the enemy too greatly. Realizing this, Ron dropped his tone.

"You think you got the upper hand because of a temporary victory? Are all the other people from [Hebi] your level? If so, then I'm disappointed." Ron proudly declared. **"I have seven trump cards at my disposal."**

He was talking about the seven—no, eight girls that the Empire had no information on. And, he was once again certain of the fact that these eight girls would be the aces in the hole against [Hebi].

He exchanged one last glance with Shirogumo. The man's face was filled with lots of emotions. Anger, shock, and yet predominance. Most likely, their next encounter wasn't too far off into the future. That's what Ron felt. And, the same apparently was the case for Shirogumo.

The second battle—fought inside the multi-floor building, finally came to an end.

Shirogumo managed to escape, but had his real face exposed. At the same time, Ron managed to grasp new information on [Hebi], but had to let Shirogumo escape. With both parties gaining new information—It was a draw.

And, the third battle, which happened without anyone's knowledge—came to an end as well, unbeknownst to anybody.

Epilogue: Ecstasy

Shirogumo was driving along the main road with his motorbike. Luckily, he managed to break through the siege of the army before he ended up on a wanted list. It also seemed like Ron was more busy with disarming the bomb instead of following him. He really managed to survive a dance with the devil, and the biggest part of that was the advantage in information, no doubt.

However, not everything ended well for him. Both for Ron and Shirogumo, this encounter was something unexpected.

Shit, this is the worst...

Unable to hold his irritation, Shirogumo clicked his tongue.

He totally remembers my face now. Not to mention that he found out I'm a member of [Hebi]...

He heard information about that man before, but having Ron in front of him was definitely too much. Without a doubt, that thing is a monster, he thought. And he wasn't surprised. After all, he was the man who inhabited every skill that [Homura] had to offer.

Even in [Hebi], only about three people could actually hold a decent one-on-one with that man. With all their efforts together, they might just be able to kill him, but would he be able to gather all of his allies, scattered around the world, to fight but one enemy from some rural country? Well, that alone might actually have enough value. Shirogumo had too many things to think about, however...

"For now, I'm glad that I managed to escape that monster." He sighed in relief.

Right as his thoughts drifted away from Ron, something else came up inside his head.

Is that psycho old lady fine, I wonder?

The only reason he came here in the first place was to provide support for her in that dire situation. Yet, ironically enough, he was the one chased out, while she made it just fine.

For some reason, Kakaribi's subordinates assisted in her escape...

It was a mystery. Shirogumo saw not a single reason why you would want to save her.

'That girl and I aren't even related by blood to begin with.'

The woman's words still resided in his head.

‘She was a baby stuffed into the trash bin at the train station. And I picked her up, thinking I could use her for my spy work. That’s why I never had any motherly love in the first place. I just gave her plastic surgery so that she would look like me, and I kind of feel bad for accidentally crushing one of her eyes.’

—That’s why you abused her like that?

‘Hm? No, not quite. That had a different reason.’

—A different reason?

‘Because that girl is just disgusting. I never knew what she was thinking... That was probably the reason why she was thrown out, she was an existence that never should have been born.’ Matilda spoke indifferently. ‘If you don’t hammer that conscience into her, then she’ll never get it. I was scared that...the more she grew up, she would lose her reason even further, so I kept hitting her over and over, until she finally lost her memories, so I threw her away again. But, thinking about it now, that was not enough. I should have probably disposed of her more directly.’

Shirogumo agreed with that. One always has to be careful of leaking information. However, the method of going at it was too cruel, even for him. ‘As a memento of her mother, I will give her this tool box. A bomb is hidden inside there. I will act as the mother until the very end, and have my daughter blow up to smithereens.’

Shirogumo was at a loss for words. After acting like a mother, being saved by her daughter, she would still kill her at the very end.

—Just to make sure, they aren’t aware of your plan, right?

The woman showed a confident smile.

‘It’s fine~ I’ve been acting along perfectly. My daughter has been tamed just fine.’ Matilda gave a conclusion. ‘These girls would never think about killing me, and neither would they be able to.’

She was confident enough that she had acted like a perfect and benevolent mother. Remembering this conversation, Shirogumo sighed.

That nauseating thinking of hers is almost on the level of [Hebi].

She might just be useful in the near future. Maybe as a sacrificial pawn.

But, what’s most important is the information Matilda held.

—I have seven trump cards at my disposal.

Kakaribi’s words, filled with confidence.

“...Gotta hear out what she has to say about those girls once she makes it back.”

Namely, these mysterious drop-outs that they had no information on.

—Truthfully fear. Righteously look down on them.

That was his creed. After all, his reunion with Kakaribi might be soon.

[Tansui] had been captured, and delivered to the Republic. After long questioning and torture, if he were to spit out information, [Tomoshihi] will surely move to ruin Shirogumo’s plan.

Ron moved to disarm the explosive. Just as Shirogumo stated, he had set it up inside the lobby of a city hotel. Looking at the composition of the explosive, it didn't possess that much force. At this time of the day, the best it could do was kill any unlucky bypasser. Then again, even that was horrible enough.

There was no wasted effort in it. It aimed to kill the bare limit of people, fulfilling its purpose. Comparing this to [Shikabane], who got drunk from his own strength, killing mindlessly, this showed at least a bit of human heart. Ron said he didn't want to be disappointed, and this wasn't half bad of a result. Swiftly, Ron disarmed the bomb.

"I saw it only for a second...but he looked like a mushroom, didn't he." Lily muttered.

Ron had already reported the circumstances to her.

"So that was a member of [Hebi], huh. To think there was a human who would manage to escape Sensei."

"We'll think about this later." Ron nodded. "For now, we have to meet up with the others."

Ron headed to the port, and made his way to Captain Werther Bart. Inside what seemed to be their base, namely a warehouse, he was in front of a giant radio machine, giving out detailed orders to his subordinates. His face was filled with exhaustion, but at the same time he showed a satisfied expression nonetheless.

"This ain't the place for you to appear at." Those words were thrown at Ron.

"We already took care of the enemy."

"Huh."

"It was a pretty strong foe. If you appeared, you might have been killed."

All the other soldiers showed confident smiles, as they gazed at Ron. Said Ron completely ignored them, and just shrugged his shoulders.

"I see. So where's the dead body."

"Cornered them at the sea, and shot them to death." Werther showed an arrogant snort. "Your advice was useless after all. We should have cornered them at the sea in the first place. Though we're searching for the dead body, it'll eventually appear again. Wanna wait until then?"

"No, it might have just been washed off into the ocean. Good work, Werther." Ron went to exchange a handshake.

Werther himself seemed to be in a great mood, as he followed that. Before that mood of his got worse again, Ron asked.

"By the way, do you have any details about this spy? Did they have the same face as on the passport picture?"

"Because of the mask, I couldn't see for sure, but..." Werther murmured to himself. "There was someone who saw her hair, and it was bluish-silver."

Ron nodded. He had expected as much. Taking Lily with him, he moved away from the busy port, far into the city, where they stopped seeing hotels and warehouses, entering a small alley with bars and the like.

Eventually, they made it to a manhole. It seemed to be a tourist spot around that had a typical water fountain. Naturally, the waterway both above and below ground were properly working. Specifically below, where it spun a web, continuing all over the city, until the sea.

Just as planned, Werther ignored Ron's advice, and led the spy to the sea. Ron opened up the manhole.

"Ah, Ron-san." Monika looked up, currently climbing the ladder. "Been a while." Drenched with the sea water, she swung one finger.

"...Monika-chan, what are you doing down there?" Lily asked.

"Taking a walk?" Monika gave an aloof excuse.

A walk through the gutters, drenched to the bone?

"—Marvelous."

All Ron did was give praise in response.

It started to rain. The sky had been filled with thick, dark clouds, but apparently it reached its limit finally. A cold rain started to pour. This should be around the time where the soldiers stopped looking for some dead body, and report it to the higher-ups.

"I'm gonna continue my walk now," Monika announced, and moved away from Ron.

She must be eager to pick up her tools before someone else finds them.

"Ah, wait a second." Monika said, as if she forgot something.

"What is it?"

Monika shrugged.

"Tell me beforehand that we had someone like that in our team. I was worrying for nothing, so embarrassing." Monika finished her words, and gave Ron no chance to respond as she walked away.

Knowing the clever Monika, she must have figured out something already.

Ron headed to the hotel Monika told them about. It was a cheap hotel, located in a street with various food stores and other brothels. Knocking on the room, Tia opened the door with a rushed voice.

"Monika, are you back?" She spoke with a happy face, but her eyes opened wide immediately after. "Se...S-Sensei?"

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey!"

As Tia was practically frozen at the door, Lily slipped past her, storming inside the room. At full speed, she rushed towards the girl sitting on the bed.

"Elna-chan!"

"Eh?" Elna was left baffled, as Lily jumped at her.

"What are you doing?! You can't just stay away from home! I was really worried!"

For some reason, she was really fixated on Elna. She carried Elna in her arms, rubbing her cheeks against hers. No matter how much Elna screamed and resisted, Lily was too focussed on pulling her cheeks left and right. At the same time, Tia showed an awkward reaction.

“U-Um, Sensei...There was an important reason as to why we couldn’t contact you—”

“Tia.” He interrupted her. “If your actions are the result of moving along your beliefs, then pull through it to the bitter end.”

“Eh...”

“As long as you are fine, then I don’t mind. It seems like you’ve grown a bit in the time I wasn’t watching.”

In a matter of seconds, Tia’s facial expression relaxed. Tears started to build up in her eyes, as her mouth twitched. She seemed to be holding back the desire to cry. Wiping her eyes to hide this fact, Tia stuck out her tongue.

“Sorry, Sensei. This break was just so great, we forgot when we were supposed to head home.”

“I see. Next time, properly report back to me.”

Of course, there were a few things Ron wanted to tell her. There’s no doubt that they’ve crossed a dangerous bridge, and by asking Ron for advice, things might have ended more smoothly. However, these four girls properly collaborated, and managed to succeed in their plan, so Ron decided to act like he didn’t see anything.

On the bed, Lily was still busy playing with Elna’s face.

“Gaaaaaaah! Why didn’t you come home on time! Elna-chan!”

“Shop iff!” Elna’s scream ran through the room.

Again, why is she so focussed on Elna? But then, Ron realized.

“Where is Annette?”

The girl with ashen-pink hair was not to be found inside the room. To that, Tia narrowed her eyes with a troubled expression.

“That’s...She said she had something to do, for which she had to be alone no matter what.”

Ron nodded after hearing that. He had a vague idea as to where she was headed. She was probably watching over the result of her battle.

Ron had known about Monika’s worries.

—The members of [Tomoshibi] lack vital cruelty.

Her worry was more than justified. Ron had caught on to that as well. The moment he gathered these girls, he was aware of this fatal flaw. In the world of spies, naivety and kindness never led to success.

—I want a spy that can be as cruel as needed when the time arrives.

He made his way to various educational facilities, and searched for a person that can fulfill this condition. Running into this girl was nothing short of a miracle.

When Ron asked for details concerning the girl, the instructor of the educational facility told him.

“It’d be better not to make her your ally.” He warned Ron. “She’s impossible to deal with, and we’ve made plans to have her drop out.”

Her codename was [Bouga]. At first, Ron didn't understand why she was given that name, seeing that she had lost her memories. You might know of the saying 'To lose oneself'. This expression apparently exists in various places of this world. Forgetting about anything, just running straight ahead, it is often compared to 'Becoming absorbed in something' or 'Going into a frenzy over something'. This state, where nothing else enters your field of view, as you focus on only one thing, one action, one idea—you could call that ecstasy, or trance all the same. It was a mysterious expression. Wouldn't people that fall under this state normally forget everything around them but themselves, and focus only on the impulses inside of themselves? In the end, all she had left was the strong self that she showed by calling herself 'the great me'. It was proof of the ultimate, yet equally pure, selfishness advocate. Because of this, Ron had chosen the girl.

The rain started pouring more intensely, hammering down on Ron's umbrella. Annette stood on a cliff with a great view around her. It was fairly close to the hotel Ron had battled Shirogumo at. You could gaze at the port with ease.

As the rain hit her directly, Annette wasn't fazed, and continued to look through the binoculars. When Ron approached her, she turned around, still looking through the binoculars.

"Ron-aniki!" She screamed. "The great me will escape!" She started running.

"Caught you." Ron grabbed her shoulder. "Annette, no more playing catch, okay."

Oddly enough, Annette smiled as she responded.

"It seems that the great me has been caught!"

It felt like a children's game. Annette stepped beneath the umbrella, and observed the port together with Ron. As expected, the army soldiers had given up on searching for the dead body, as they reported it to the higher ups, and pulled back. At the pier, they started unloading the cargo. So that they could make up for the time loss, they worked fast and thoroughly. At this very moment, a single container was currently being lifted up.

"Are you watching the container?"

"Yes. The great me is observing it."

Annette once again gazed through the binoculars. Like a child currently watching birds, you could hear a faint humming barely making it through the rain pouring. It might just be an original song of hers. Ron equally took out some binoculars, and observed the container currently being lifted up. On the side of it, the number [3-696] was written. Taking that number, and the data of the cargo being brought into this port into consideration, Ron arrived at that conclusion.

"...When I was gathering the members of [Tomoshibi], I was the most hesitant about you."

Annette removed her gaze from the binoculars.

"Mm. Am I a bother after all?"

"No," Ron shook his head. "I just felt that you might have to carry some crucial role."

"Did I do anything like that?"

"....."

Apparently, she wasn't even aware of it. But, was that a good thing or not?

"I figured it out." Ron said. "The woman inside of that container, what's her name?"

"Matilda-san!" Without trying to hide anything, Annette answered Ron's question.

She told him about everything. Their encounter with Matilda, the dinner at the restaurant, the escape from there, the revelation that she is a spy, the bout between Monika and Tia, and finally, the assistance of her escape. She spoke of it all like they were precious memories.

"How was it?" Ron asked. "Did you enjoy this break?"

"It was very fulfilling!" Annette jumped up ever so slightly. "The great me has learned a lot. At first, I didn't know why Tia-aneki and the others were so bothered with 'Mother'. I could never accept it. Be it at the pool or the dinner, the great me had no idea."

"I see. So, did you finally understand what a 'Mother' is like?"

"Yes. The great me has become a bit more clever again!" She showed her white teeth. "At times, she gets angry, praises me, and teaches me all sorts of stuff. A mother is someone...who supports my feelings and my decision. That's why, when my mother shows a sad face, then I get angry! That's the kind of existence she is."

Ron was rather surprised. This was fairly different from the usual Annette that Ron knew. Normally, she would always blurt out nonsense, exclamations hard to follow. It seems as if a great change inside the girl had occurred these past few days. However, there was one thing Ron had to ask.

"So, this mother." Ron gave Annette a dubious gaze. "Is that Matilda-san?"

"No." Annette said. "It's Tia-aneki." She continued. "**That woman is a failure.**" Oddly enough, her tone and way of phrasing sounded cold, and distant.

Darkness resided in her one eye. Ron felt the tips of his fingers growing numb. Only a first-class spy would be able to emit such vivid ill-will.

"...So you had seen through Matilda's real personality."

That woman had killed the five men of the thief brigade. Tia and the others seemed clueless about the fact, but Matilda turned out to be a killer that found no trouble conducting such a homicide.

"Since when?"

"After the day she announced that she was a spy. When we met her at the beach, she gave off the stench of blood, and the police were running around."

"I see."

"The great me was really angry." Annette puffed out her cheeks, pouting in a cute fashion. "She suddenly appeared, and when we returned the tool box she liked so much, she had the nerve to just kill someone. Imagine that, just ignoring Tia-aneki's hard work."

"But, you couldn't hand her over to the military, right."

That must have been the easiest method possible. And, it felt like something Monika would do. But, Annette shook her head.

"—With the tool box we took back, a spy of the Empire killed citizens of our country."

"....."

"If these bastards from the army found out, it'd be a scandal for [Tomoshihi], right?"

She's correct. Matilda is Annette's mother. A girl, working for the Intelligence Agency of her own country, as well as the daughter of an Empire's spy, assisted in regaining the woman's tool box, which led to victims like this. The major responsibility laid with the killer, but there's no doubt that the Office of Foreign Affairs would take a lot of the blame. Not to mention that the army was always hungry for any sort of scandal related to the Office.

"...Basically, things turned exceptionally complicated, huh." Ron deduced.

"If you handed over Matilda to the Army, they would immediately use that as a weakness. The time limit was close. But, I wasn't there to take care of everything. On top of that, you were seething with anger."

Taking all of that into consideration, the answer was simple.

"—That's why you decided to assassinate Matilda."

"Correct. That's Ron-aneki for you." Annette clapped her hands together.

This third battle—was a battle of deceit, fought by Matilda, acting as a mother, and Annette, acting as a daughter. Naturally, the winner of this battle was more than apparent.

"So you acted like you assisted her escape, and stuffed her into that container."

Ron yet again confirmed the number on the container. As expected, Matilda was inside a container unfit for her escape. Did nobody realize? No, Tia had properly confirmed the number.

"...You changed the number written on it. Using paint that would wash away in the rain, you wrote a different number on the container, and had her hide inside a different container than planned."

"Amazing. You figured it out!" Yet again, Annette clapped her hands together.

Of course. With no ill-will, you wouldn't let someone escape through a container. It's a secluded space with no fresh air nor a toilet. Staying one day there, you'd surely get out of air soon. Normally, the route would take around 15 hours, ending up with the arrival at the Lairat Kingdom.

However, Annette sent her on a different route.

"That container is being brought on a cargo ship heading to another continent." Ron muttered. "Just to make sure, what are her chances of escape?"

"The great me gave her an escape tool that breaks immediately. It's impossible."

These containers are used to carry cargo. Never would you imagine that a human is being locked inside of there. No matter how much of a ruckus she may cause, she can't open the door on her own. In other words—

"At a longest of ten days in confinement—and starve to death."

The next time the container would be opened, the people working there would find a dead body. To that, Annette showed an innocent smile.

"It's punishment for making the great me angry."

It was cruel, no doubt, but the assassination left no traces. Not even the army should have any idea. On top of that, Matilda had no idea about this. She believed that these girls were helping her out of the goddess of their hearts. There was no need to even fight.

"But, is that really enough for you?" Ron commented. "There's the chance that Matilda might have caught on to this, asked for help, and will be saved. It is a thick prison of metal, but her voice should be able to reach outside."

"The great me is no devil after all. I gave her a 1% chance of survival!"

The second she revealed that, it happened.

—The container exploded.

Fire started gushing out of the container mid-air. Eventually, the entire object was wrapped up in flames.

"And! Right now! Even that 1% chance has been blown to smithereens!"

Anette laughed.

The strong light coming from the roaring flames turned into blinding light, covering up the girl's expression. It must have been wheat flour inside, as a pitch black smoke rose up. The workers at the port panicked to lower the container. Looking down at them, Annette nodded in a satisfying manner.

"Matilda herself created this explosion. Naturally, she activated it herself."

Ron knew of her skill. Whatever it may be, she could repair it, and create a perfect copy. She must have switched the tool boxes, which both of them held. During the escape at the port, Annette realized that Matilda's tool box had been set up with an explosive, and judged the way to use it.

—Give Annette that tool box, and have it explode.

Annette saw through this, and had Matilda use this on herself.

"Self-destruction like this, what a foolish person she was." Annette spit out these words, as if she sounded bored from the bottom of her heart. "If she didn't think of killing me, she might have just survived."

Naturally, she was completely right. If Matilda hadn't been dead set on killing her daughter, this tragedy wouldn't have happened. Of course, there was no need to sympathize with that woman, and yet—

"....."

The port workers were running around wildly because of the burning container. Luckily, nobody was hurt in the process too. But, eventually they will find it, the corpse burned to a crisp inside the container. No doubt identifying the body will prove troublesome.

How would Tia feel if she saw this? No doubt, she would be shocked. Shocked at Annette killing her mother, while having shown affection all this time. That's probably why she never revealed it to her allies. In order to achieve her goal, she put on the face of a saint, using the people around her—a devilish method.

“...Say, Aniki.” Annette looked over at him. “Are you also going to say that the great me shouldn't have been born?”

It was a question that truly showed what was inside Annette's heart.

“Hm? What do you mean? Did somebody say that to you?”

“That's...Hm? Wait? I don't remember!”

“Why did you forget about that?”

“It just feels like someone said that to the great me before!” Annette said in joy. “Everytime I did something, someone told me ‘Your entire existence is a mistake’ or something like that!”

“.....”

Someone in the past must have told her that. Werther said the same: ‘Like the existence of this killer is overwhelmingly evil’ were his words. There might have been someone who told Annette something similar in the past. Maybe Matilda? Or, an instructor from the educational facility? Ron shook his head.

Wrong. All of them were fools who didn't bother to look.

He denied this denial. Even if her methods are cruel, he should accept her with everything he had.

What would have happened if Annette hadn't chosen this method? In desperation, Matilda might have landed a suicide attack on the army soliders, creating countless innocent victims. The army might have gotten a grasp of a scandal they could use in the future. Matilda would have escaped by using her skilled acting.

This is the answer the cruel girl came up with, playing with [Tomoshibi] itself, the Army, and the enemy spies. For their own country, that was the best possible result.

“Annette, the cruelty you have in you is a weapon nobody else in the team possesses. There is no way that would be a mistake.”

If anybody was wrong, it was this world itself. In this rotten world, the girl had chosen the right path.

“—Marvelous. You have made me feel proud for the fact that I chose you as a member.”

In a team with only benevolent people, a collapse can occur easily. They weren't living in a world of rainbows and butterflies. At times, cruelty is needed. A team with great variety is the key. With many allies and their diverse personalities, a team can grow even stronger. So far, they were

lacking it. This...evil to strike down other evil. One day, there will be a moment of need for this innocent evil, clouded by nothing.

[Tomoshibi]'s final weapon—that is the role given to Annette by Ron.

“That’s Aniki for you! The great me loves you very much!” Annette jumped happily, and clung to Ron’ neck.

“Don’t jump at me like that.”

“Not listening~”

Ron ordered her to get off, but Annette showed no signs of obeying. Slowly, she was climbing up Ron’ neck, drenching his body with her wet clothes.

“Because it’s Aniki, the great me will tell you something—The greatest secret of mine.” In that posture, she said. “It’s the other reason why I killed Matilda-san.”

“...What is it?”

“She gave me a reckless remark. Even after I killed her, my anger still hasn’t calmed down.” She climbed up towards Ron’ ear, and whispered.

“She said ‘That girl hasn’t changed’, even after not seeing me for four years.”

With just these words, Annette decided to kill her mother. No doubt Matilda couldn’t have anticipated this. She subconsciously instigated Annette’s rage. There was no meaning to her acting like a great mother.

Losing herself, moving only straight ahead—Nothing could have stopped Annette’s lust for the kill any longer. That was the reason why Annette was so clingy towards Tia, and felt hatred towards Matilda. The evil in front of Ron spoke with an innocent angelic voice.

“The great me was worried that I wasn’t growing at all.”



Next Mission

“.....”

On the terrace of the Kagerou Palace, Tia showed a listless expression. Ever since they've returned from the incident with Annette—or the Matilda uproar they called it—she's been feeling down. Even as she kept up her act in front of the others, when she ended up alone, the scorn of Matilda flashed up before her eyes.

This entire month, she had been plagued by her inferiority complex. She encountered stronger spies than herself, only dancing inside their palms. Ron, Shikabane, Monika, Matilda...

How close was she to the stage they were standing on? All the pride she had as part of the selected team had vanished. She had heard that Grete and the others fought a first-rate spy, and defeated them without Ron even being around. Compared to that, the selected team didn't do anything on their own. The back she admired was so far in the distance. It made her want to cry.

“That's one depressing face.” A voice called out to Tia.

It was Ron, with cups in both his hands. They were filled with hot tea.

“Thanks...I was just a bit dejected, that's all.”

“I see. Actually, the same goes for me.”

“Eh? Sensei is?”

“Why are you so surprised? I'm a human myself, so I feel sad at times.” Ron stood next to Tia. “Even if the mission was a success, there's no guarantee that everything worked flawlessly. I often ponder if there might not have been a better choice.”

“So that happens with Sensei even...”

Ron took a sip of his own mug. He seemed to have no intentions on asking any more, nor speak up about his own problems. He must have had some sort of regret as of late.

—Like having a bitter enemy escape from him.

“.....”

Tia wanted to ask, but Ron was focussed on drinking his tea in silence. Hence, she tried to go with a different question.

“So...what should I do to rid myself of this regret?”

“Rather than hearing my response, I’ll instead tell you the words of my boss.”

“[Kouro]-san’s words?”

“That would be a better fit for you, right?” Ron drank the tea all at once.

“Fulfill your next mission perfectly—that’s all there is to it.”

“Wonderful words as always.”

Learning from him, Tia equally emptied her cup in one go. The still hot liquid ran down her throat. As her body warmed up, she proceeded to let out a hot breath.

“Let’s go.” Ron said. “The others should have gathered by now.”

Following Ron, Tia made her way to the banquet hall. Just as he assumed, the other girls were already present, engaging in a heated discussion. There were those who started to act independently, and those who stopped them.

“...This is getting a bit too annoying for me, maybe I should just go back to my own room.” Monika narrowed her eyes, about to get up from her seat.

“Wait, I’m not done bragging about myself yet!” Lily grabbed her arm, pulling her down again.

At the same time, Elna awkwardly averted her face, which was caught by Sara, who then asked ‘Elna-senpai, what kind of places did you see?’ with a kind smile.

“Elna was constantly bullied by Annette!” Elna screamed in response.

As for Annette, she got up from her seat with a ‘The great me wants to drink some hot milk!’, about to head over to the kitchen, only to be caught by Zibia.

“Put up with it for now...”

“.....” Watching this scenery, Tia had trouble finding the right words.

“...Did something happen?” Grete asked in a worried manner.

“No, I just thought that everyone being here really is the best.” Tia would have never thought she would say something like that.

“—Marvelous.” Ron stood in front of the girls, and nodded.

He praised them with his usual words.

“Good work on your missions. With all this success, we as [Tomoshihi] can move on to the next phase.”

“Next phase?” Zibia asked.

“[Shikabane] spit out some new information.” Ron announced. “We found out about [Hebi]’s next appearance. We’re going to start gathering information now.”

The others raised voices of admiration. It was a planned assassination originally, where Ron succeeded to capture the target alive. With such a skilled individual like [Shikabane], Ron had the right idea, because that scored the Office new intel.

The unknown spy team [Hebi] led to the demise of [Homura]. Being the target of Ron’ revenge, they were the reason why he gathered these girls in the first place.

“So?” Zibia showed a provocative grin. “Who are you going to select now?” All girls present swallowed their breaths at these words. Ron had already decided on the members.

[Yumegatari] Tia, with her special talent: Negotiating. By meeting gazes with another person for three seconds, she can read their desires.

[Manamusume] Grete, with her special talent: Creating disguises. She can change her outer appearance and even voice to act like someone else.

[Hanazono] Lily, with her special talent: Using poison. She herself has an idiosyncrasy that makes her immune to poison.

[Hyakki] Zibia, with her special talent: Skilled theft. Erasing her presence, she succeeds in stealing items in the hands of someone else.

[Hyoujin] Monika, with her special talent: [Hidden]. On top of that, she had insane skill and talent.

[Sougen] Sara, with her special talent: Training animals. She can give orders to animals like falcons or dogs.

[Bouga] Annette, with her special talent: Engineering and manufacturing. She can create perfect copies of objects of weapons.

[Gujin] Elna, with her special talent: Being attracted to accidents. She can read the misfortune around her, using this against her target.

Together with long training and experiences on missions, the girls had gathered solid skill, and Ron found confidence in them.

“Everyone. With the nine of us, we will find out the identity of [Hebi].”

The girls raised another voice of admiration again, showing victorious poses. Seeing this, Ron nodded, and told them the plan of action. This time around, it was an infiltration on enemy grounds. And, the destination was unexplored for the girls: Located on a different continent—The Federal State of Musaia.

Not having participated in the World War, they supplied the war regions with goods, turning into a great country through rapid growth. Even now, they hold great politics and economics, so much that the Republic of Deen can’t even compare to it.

A wave of anxiety filled the rows of the girls.

“Tia.” Ron spoke up. “At the scene, you will take command.”

“Eh.....” Tia’s eyes opened wide.

“You should be able to do it right now. Have Grete devise a plan, and give orders to the other members.”

“W-Wait a second. What about you, Sensei?”

Until now, Ron was the one in command. With him at the top, the girls would follow his orders, and together they were [Tomoshibi].

“Isn’t that obvious? The way you are now, you can carry my responsibility. With this, I can move freely. A position most fit for me.” Ron revealed. “I will stand at the frontlines.”

These words made the girls' hearts shake. It was an emotion mixed with joy and anticipation. During the battle with [Hebi], Ron will finally show his true abilities.

Afterword

I know this isn't something to talk about in the afterword of the 3rd volume, but please let me tell you a story of when I was writing on volume 2. When volume 1 went on sale, a special campaign was held on the official website. Though we had to leave out a certain unlucky blonde-haired girl for obvious reasons, you could vote for one out of the seven heroines to be on the cover of volume 2. At the same time, I had already planned the general layout for volume 2.

But, we had some worries. Right a bit before the release of volume 1, my editor came to speak to me.

"Takemachi-san, what should we do if a girl not appearing in volume two were to win the poll?"

What a viewpoint indeed. Since I was already in the middle of writing volume 2, if Tia or Monika had ended up as the winner, then I had no idea how to deal with that, since they were not appearing in volume two. But, I had given this some thought.

"Don't worry! In that event, I will fix the manuscript of volume two right away!"

Of course, I had no basis for that whatsoever. All I could do was put trust in my omnipotent skill of an author that was about to debut. In the end, after volume 1 went on sale—I received a call from my editor.

"Annette has been voted as the first place. As aforementioned, could I ask you to revise the manuscript for volume two?"

Amazing. I thought that, seeing how little to no action she got in volume 1, she would surely not be as popular. Yet, together with Kusunoki Tomori-sama's voice and Tomari-sensei's character design, she managed to take first place nonetheless. With a shaking voice, I mustered up my courage and told my editor.

"I'm sorry. If this girl were to participate in volume two, it would break apart the entire story...She is the only one where it won't work."

Naturally, my editor just went "What are you talking about?", completely baffled. And, I have no excuses. As you can see, my omnipotent skill had been smashed to smithereens by a single girl. I can already see her grin at me, saying 'Not like that's the great me's problem!'. Really, she cannot be controlled by anybody—and that is her charm.

Now, I would like to thank Tomari-sensei, and all the voice actors involved for this result, as well, of course, all the people that have voted.

Lastly, a bit more information about the next volume. I've made you wait, but we've finally gathered all of [Tomoshihi]. Having grown immensely, they will face their strongest enemy, showing the culmination of their hard work in the series.

I will try my hardest to deliver a worthy 4th volume, which will bring an end to the first season of [Spy Room].

This has been Takemachi.

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